The New Criterion

November 1998

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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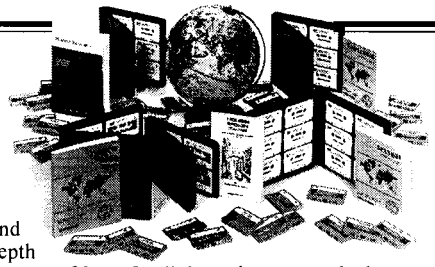

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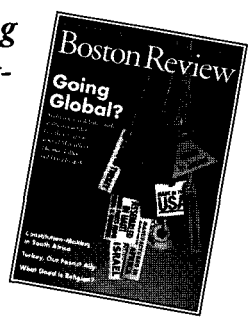

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Notes & Comments: November 1998

Liberal screaming

Connoisseurs of sophistry and politicized intellectual mendacity will find a lot to occupy them in "Going Down Screaming," the seven-thousand-word blast against contemporary American conservatism by Andrew Sullivan that appeared as the cover story in *The New York Times Magazine* on Sunday, October 11. Mr. Sullivan, a clever English journalist who was editor of *The New Republic* for several years in the 1990s, has always thrived on contradiction. He first emerged on the scene as a transplanted Tory Catholic who was also homosexual. He left the editorship of *The New Republic* a few years ago because he had contracted AIDS. Since then, he has been on an increasingly shrill campaign to legitimate this year's favorite oxymoron, "gay marriage."

We mention these biographical details because they form the unspoken theme of "Going Down Screaming." Mr. Sullivan does not declare his sexual allegiances in this essay; possibly he believes that he and his views are too widely known to require identification for readers of *The New York Times*; we think it is more likely that he wanted to cultivate an appearance of dispassionateness as he set about trashing some of his former friends for "moralism."

The ostensible occasion for Mr. Sullivan's broadside was Kenneth Starr's now-famous report detailing President Clinton's sexual misconduct and subsequent obfuscation and perjurious testimony. According to Mr. Sullivan, the Starr report is most important as "a case study in what has gone wrong with American conservatism." Never mind that it contains a host of potentially impeachable allegations against the President of the United States. For Andrew Sullivan, the Starr report shows above all that contemporary American conservatism is both "prurient" and "puritanical," that it has "lost sight of the principles of privacy and restraint, modesty and constitutionalism, which used to be its hallmarks."

Mr. Sullivan knows what a potent weapon the accusation of "puritanism" is in contemporary America. He knows that many of his readers would far rather be accused of dishonesty or immorality than "puritanical tendencies." Mr. Sullivan also knows the immense value of changing the subject. Like many liberal commentators, he pretends that the real issue is not the behavior of Bill Clinton and his inner circle but the activities of those legally charged with investigating that behavior. Bill Clinton engages in a series of grotesque sexual contacts with a federal employee, lies about it under oath, and here is Andrew Sullivan complaining that it is American conservatism which lacks restraint and modesty.

"Going Down Screaming" is part of a new genre of liberal polemic whose chief

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tactic is to convince people that the really dangerous thing about conservatism is that it is too left-wing. Thus Mr. Sullivan charges contemporary conservatism with "a vehemence and activism that can only be called characterologically leftist." We suppose that there is a kind of compliment implicit in this rhetorical gambit: if there were good arguments against the conservative criticism of the counterculture, presumably leftists would deploy them. Instead, they close their eyes and accuse conservatives of radicalism in the hope that people will acknowledge the force of the argument but overlook the detail that it applies to the accuser rather than the accused.

Part of what makes Mr. Sullivan's essay such a vertiginous experience to read is the way that it exemplifies what it attempts to criticize. In brief, there is a lot of screaming in "Going Down Screaming." Andrew Sullivan complains bitterly about conservative moralism. But has there been a more hectoring piece of liberal moralism in recent memory? If so, we missed it. Mr. Sullivan is not particular in his indictment. He has ominous things to say about conservative figures from Robert Bork and William Kristol to Richard John Neuhaus and David Frum. He lambastes *The Weekly Standard*, which Mr. Kristol edits, for "gleefully egg[ing] on Republicans in their moral crusade" and castigates *Commentary* for publishing Mr. Kristol on abortion and so abetting "the vocabulary of religious war."

Mr. Sullivan accuses conservatives of "moral obsessiveness" when it comes to Bill Clinton's sex-lies-and-videotaped misdeeds. But his own amoral obsessiveness about sex is patent in practically every paragraph of "Going Down Screaming." The real theme of the essay is the old countercultural dream of emancipating sex from morality. Mr. Sullivan takes the writer David Frum to task for criticizing "the central dogma of the baby boomers: the belief that sex, so long as it's consensual, ought never to be subject to moral scrutiny at all." But as a professing Catholic, Mr. Sullivan must surely know that every religion known to history has enveloped sexuality with a rich filigree of moral sentiment and prohibition. And not only religion: if being "consensual" somehow exempted sex from moral scrutiny, much of world literature would instantly be rendered unintelligible.

To say that Mr. Sullivan wants to have it both ways is like saying a Swiss cheese has holes. On the one hand, he fulminates against the moralism of "conservative extremists." On the other, he writes toward the end of his essay that "this is not to say, of course, that morality is not an important, or an importantly conservative, issue." We have to admire that audacious "of course." Andrew Sullivan has just spent five- or six-thousand words decrying traditional morality; then in Act V, scene iv he casually declares himself on the side of the angels. But a moral life is not available simply by declaration. It is first of all a matter of behavior, of how we live our lives. Pleasures and pains, as Aristotle pointed out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, are the things that moral virtue is concerned with. Mr. Sullivan, an apostle of a new brand of countercultural liberation, wants to do what he pleases but maintain a reputation for moral rectitude. It is a contradictory ambition, shot through with bad faith. But of such stuff is the liberal consensus made of today.

"In the end character is destiny"

When the histories of the Clinton administration come to be written in the next century, what Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan last summer characterized as a "crisis of the regime" will inevitably be the principal focus. Yet central to any future account of this "crisis of the regime" will be a subject which the public—and until very recently, the press—has been notoriously reluctant to confront: the role played by the character of the President himself in creating this crisis. What this public display of a

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refusal to render a moral judgment on the President's character has cost this country, and what that refusal has contributed to the political crisis, will also be subjects for historians to ponder for many years to come. For the "crisis of the regime" has turned out to be a moral crisis for the nation.

What the failures of the American press have contributed to this twofold crisis must also loom large in any future account of the Clinton presidency. To what extent this failure of judgment may be attributed to liberal bias—the bias, that is, of a largely liberal press in coming to terms with the delinquencies of a liberal President—is a matter about which opinion is likely to differ along party lines. All that can be said with absolute certainty is that no conservative Republican president would have received so much sympathy and "understanding" from our liberal press under similar circumstances.

About the role of the American press in this "crisis of the regime," the most penetrating assessment we have seen is that recently written by Robert L. Bartley, the editor of the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*. We quote:

> Among the institutions that failed in adequately discharging its watchdog role was the press. It can scarcely be said that the Clinton Presidency enjoyed a fawning press; from time to time the press would wax hot over the President's failings. But from the first Whitewater report by Jeff Gerth of *The New York Times* in 1992, what has been lacking has been follow-through. The Clinton campaign mastered the art of "spin" and carried these skills into the White House, and gradually the press became content to report merely the spin. Only a small band of reporters, themselves often under attack from the White House, roamed Arkansas and probed relentlessly into the underlying reality. The press in general—until the uniformly negative assessment of the President's August 17 speech—never stitched together the recurrent scandals with the theme that in the end character is destiny.

This is quoted from Mr. Bartley's introduction to *A Journal Briefing: Whitewater*, Volume IV, the latest of the comprehensive anthologies drawn from the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* on the subject of the Clinton presidency. These volumes are indispensable reading for anyone attempting to make sense of the impeachment process now unfolding in the House of Representatives, and Volume IV has the added merit of providing readers with a detailed chronology of the President's career from 1976, the year Bill Clinton was elected Arkansas Attorney General, to September 9, 1998, when the Independent Counsel, Kenneth Starr, sent his report to Congress. Like its predecessors, this latest anthology is a vivid lesson in the great difference that separates journalism devoted to fundamental facts and their consequences and journalism caught up in the looking-glass world of "spin" and its consequences—consequences that have now brought us to the crisis of impeachment.

Mr. Bartley writes,

> In our own minds, our overriding motives have been journalistic, helping our readers comprehend their lives and times. We wrote, published and collected these articles not as a vendetta but as a statement of news judgment. From the first our conviction was that the Clinton character would prove to be the big story of his presidency. We were wrong in believing the electorate would understand this in 1996; yet even in his victory the campaign funding scandal exploded. The more we learned and the more we wrote, the more we were convinced that at some point a dam had to burst and the character story would explode in one way or another. We are proud not that we've contributed to the President's troubles, but that our news judgment has been vindicated.

And so it has, on a scale that no other American publication can match. That, too, must be part of the history of this melancholy period in our national life.

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The betrayal of liberalism: III

"One very simple principle"

by Roger Kimball

The most mischievous errors on record . . . [have been] half-truths taken as the whole.
—S. T. Coleridge, *Literary Remains* (1838)

From the winter of 1821, when I first read Bentham, . . . I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object.
—J. S. Mill, *Autobiography* (1873)

Complete moral tolerance is possible only when men have become completely indifferent to each other—that is to say, when society is at an end.
—J. F. Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1873)

It is a melancholy truth that bad arguments often prevail over better ones, and that very bad arguments sometimes gain a virtual monopoly in the court of public sentiment. In extreme cases, a bad argument so mesmerizes the public that its status as an argument—as one, necessarily limited, point of view competing with others—tends to deliquesce. It takes on an aura of inevitability. It seems to present not so much a way of looking at the world as the world itself. When this happens, serious alternatives suffer the handicap of being regarded as mere "partisan" or political gestures, even as the partisan nature of the triumphant argument is increasingly lost to view. Dissent from this new orthodoxy then appears as dissent from the simple reality of the way things are: less a challenge than a perversion.

Liberalism, broadly defined, has long occupied this enviable position. It prescribes not only the terms of debate, but also the rhetorical atmosphere in which any debate must take place. Many of its central doctrines—above all, perhaps, its uncritical celebration of "innovation" in social, political, and moral matters—are taken-for-granted articles of belief. Do not be misled by any renewed attention that may from time to time be lavished on welfare reform, tax cuts, "family values," law and order, civility, or military preparedness: these and other remedial initiatives identified as "conservative" today take place in a context saturated by liberal assumptions. For better or worse—no doubt for better and worse—we are all liberals now: by dint of contagion if not conviction. How could it be otherwise? As the English historian Maurice Cowling noted in his book *Mill and Liberalism* (1963; second edition, 1990), for many years now "to use liberal language has been taken to be *intelligent*: to reject it evidence of *stupidity*." That conviction has long since been elevated into a fundamental *donnée* of intellectual life: an unspoken assumption that colors every aspect of political and moral deliberation.

No one was more important in bringing about this state of affairs than Cowling's subject, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Mill would not have been surprised that to speak as he taught one to speak—to speak in Mill, as it were—was to be thought intelligent,

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while to speak otherwise was to be thought stupid. He believed it himself; and he did everything in his very considerable powers to encourage the belief in others. "The stupid party" was Mill's own summary description of conservatives (this despite his admiration for Coleridge).

For anyone interested in understanding the nature of the modern liberal consensus, the extraordinary success of Mill's rhetoric and the doctrines it advances afford a number of important lessons. It is an object lesson in the immense seductiveness inherent in a certain type of skeptical moralizing. Together with Rousseau, Mill supplied nearly all of the arguments and most of the emotional weather—the texture of sentiment—that have gone into defining the liberal vision of the world. His peculiar brand of utilitarianism—a cake of Benthamite hedonism glazed with Wordsworthian sentimentality—accounts for part of Mill's appeal: it provides a perfect recipe for embellishing programmatic shallowness with a patina of spirituality and elevated "feeling."

Another large part of Mill's appeal rests on his "feminism." I mean his conviction, put forward in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), that differences between the sexes were accidental and that, as Leslie Stephen put it, "women could be turned into men by trifling changes in the law." Both are indispensable elements in the intoxicating potion that makes up Millian liberalism. (Mill's "feminism," by the way, got an additional boost from his long intimacy with Harriet Taylor—Mrs. John Taylor. He married her after her husband died and then, after her death, adulated her in embarrassingly extravagant terms; it is noteworthy that this "lofty minded" relationship was apparently never consummated.)

But the intellectual and affective keys to understanding the success of Mill's doctrine are in *On Liberty*. This brief manifesto was published in 1859, coincidentally the same year as *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin's book has been credited—and blamed—for all manner of moral and religious mischief. But in the long run *On Liberty* may have effected an even greater revolution. It profoundly changed the way we think, not about the world, exactly—Mill was not a scientist—but about what matters in the way we comport ourselves in the world.

Whatever else can be said about it, *On Liberty* is a masterpiece of liberal polemic. Its core ideas are as the air we breathe: unnoticed because ubiquitous. Mill's arguments and pronouncements about man as a "progressive being," the extent of individual autonomy, the limits of acceptable moral and legal censure, the importance of innovation and (perhaps his most famous phrase) "experiments in living," and his corollary insistence on the poverty of custom, prejudice, and tradition: all are familiar to the point of invisibility. They are no longer objects of debate but of reverence, moral axioms that discussion is expected to presuppose, not challenge.

But the success of Mill's teaching says nothing about the cogency of his arguments. In fact, Mill's central arguments are open to—and have from the beginning been subjected to—serious challenge. Yet they have raged like wildfire through the Western world, consuming everything that stands in their path. Which means, among other things, that they exert an appeal quite distinct from any intellectual merit they may possess. (And which in turn suggests something about the potential liability of being thought intelligent—and vice versa.)

As for the nature of Mill's arguments, consider, for example, his famous plea on behalf of moral, social, and intellectual "experiments." Throughout history, Mill argues, the authors of such innovations have been objects of ridicule, persecution, and oppression; they have been ignored, silenced, exiled, imprisoned, even killed. But (Mill continues) we owe every step of progress, intellectual as well as moral, to the daring of innovators. "Without them," he writes, "human life would become a stagnant pool. Not only is it they who introduce good things which did not before exist; it is they

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who keep the life in those which already exist." Ergo, innovators—"developed human beings" is one phrase Mill uses for them—should not merely be tolerated but positively be encouraged as beacons of future improvement.

The philosopher David Stove calls this the "They All Laughed At Christopher Columbus" argument. In a brief, penetrating essay in *Cricket Versus Republicanism* (1995), Stove notes that "the Columbus argument" (as he calls it for short)

> has swept the world. With every day that has passed since Mill published it, it has been more influential than it was the day before. In the intellectual and moral dissolution of the West in the twentieth century, every step has depended on conservatives being disarmed, at some critical point, by the Columbus argument; by revolutionaries claiming that any resistance made to them is only another instance of that undeserved hostility which beneficial innovators have so regularly met with in the past.

The weakness of the Columbus argument, Stove observes, is glaring. Granted that every change for the better has depended on someone embarking on a new departure; but so, too, has every change for the worse. And surely there have been at least as many proposed innovations which "were or would have been for the worse as ones which were or would have been for the better." Which means that we have at least as much reason to discourage innovators as to encourage them, especially when their innovations bear on things as immensely complex as the organization of society.

The triumph of Millian liberalism shows that such objections have fallen on deaf ears. But why? Why have "innovation," "originality," etc., become magic charms that neutralize criticism before it even gets started when so much that is produced in the name of innovation is obviously a change for the worse? An inventory of the fearsome social innovations made in this century alone should have made every thinking person wary of unchaperoned innovation. One reason that innovation has survived with its reputation intact, Stove notes, is that Mill and his heirs have been careful to supply a "one-sided diet of examples." It is a technique as simple as it is effective:

> Mention no past innovators except those who were innovators-for-the-better. Harp away endlessly on the examples of Columbus and Copernicus, Galileo and Bruno, Socrates and (if you think the traffic will bear it) Jesus. Conceal the fact that there must have been at least one innovator-for-the-worse for every one of these (very overworked) good guys. Never mention Lenin or Pol Pot, Marx or Hegel, Robespierre or the Marquis de Sade, or those forgotten innovators of genius to whom humanity has been indebted for any of the countless insane theories which have ever acquired a following in astronomy, geology, or biology.

Mill never missed an opportunity to expatiate on the value of "originality," "eccentricity," and the like. ("The amount of eccentricity in a society," he wrote, "has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage it contained.") But you never caught Mill dilating on the "improvement on established practice" inaugurated by Robespierre and St. Just, or the "experiments in living" conducted by the Marquis de Sade. (It is hardly surprising that, today, the phrase "experiments in living" is redolent of the fatuous "experiments" of the 1960s; whatever else can be said about the phrase, Stove is surely right that it represents "a sickeningly dishonest attempt to capture some of the deserved prestige of science for things that had not the remotest connection with science"—principally "certain sexual and domestic arrangements of a then-novel kind.")

David Stove offers some telling insights into the weaknesses of Mill's liberalism. But in order to understand its world-conquering success, one has to go beyond simple

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credulity and an abundance of one-sided examples. Flattery comes into it. Mill was exceptionally adroit at appealing to his readers' vanity. When he spoke (as he was always speaking) of "persons of decided mental superiority" he made it seem as though he might actually be speaking to *them*. Mill said that there was "no reason that all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns." Quite right! Even if persons of genius are always likely to be "a small minority," still we must "preserve the soil in which they grow." Consequently, people have a duty to shun custom and nurture their individual "self-development" if they are not to jeopardize "their fair share of happiness" and the "mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable."

But Mill's blandishments went even deeper. In *On Liberty*, Mill presented himself as a prophet of individual liberty. He has often been regarded as such, especially by academics, who of course have been instrumental in propagating the gospel according to Mill. And "gospel" is the *mot juste*. Like many radical reformers, Mill promised almost boundless freedom but arrived bearing an exacting new system of belief. In this sense, as Maurice Cowling argues, *On Liberty* has been "one of the most influential of modern political tracts," chiefly because "its purpose has been misunderstood." Contrary to common opinion, Cowling wrote, Mill's book was

> not so much a plea for individual freedom, as a means of ensuring that Christianity would be superseded by that form of liberal, rationalising utilitarianism which went by the name of the Religion of Humanity. Mill's liberalism was a dogmatic, religious one, not the soothing night-comforter for which it is sometimes mistaken. Mill's object was not to free men, but to convert them, and convert them to a peculiarly exclusive, peculiarly insinuating moral doctrine. Mill wished to moralize all social activity. . . . Mill, no less than Marx, Nietzsche, or Comte, claimed to replace Christianity by "something better." Atheists and agnostics, humanists and freethinkers may properly give thanks to Mill.

This tension in Mill's work—between Mill the libertarian and Mill the moralistic utilitarian—helps to account for the vertiginous quality that suffuses the liberalism for which *On Liberty* was a kind of founding scripture. Mill's announced enemy can be summed up in words like "custom," "prejudice," "established morality." All his work goes to undermine these qualities, not because they are necessarily in error but because they have not been subjected to the acid-test of his version of the utilitarian calculus (what Mill is more likely to refer to as "rational self-conscious scrutiny"). An earlier tradition celebrated custom precisely because it had prevailed and given good service through the vicissitudes of time and change; its longevity was a token of its worthiness. It was in this sense, for example, that Edmund Burke extolled prejudice, writing that "prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit. . . . Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature."

Mill overturned this traditional view. Indeed, he was instrumental in getting the public to associate "prejudice" indelibly with "bigotry." For Mill, established morality is suspect *because it is established*. In this sense, his liberalism is essentially corrosive of existing societal arrangements, institutions, and morality. In this sense, his philosophy is a kind of inversion of Alexander Pope's optimism: "Whatever is, is suspect" might be Mill's motto. He constantly castigates the "magical influence of custom" ("magical" being a negative epithet for Mill), the "despotism of custom [that] is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement," the "tyranny of opinion" that makes it so difficult for "the progressive principle" to flourish, and so on. According to Mill, the "greater part of the world has, properly speaking, no history because the sway of custom has been complete."

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Such passages reveal the core of moral arrogance in Mill's liberalism. They suggest to what extent he remained—despite the various criticisms he made—a faithful heir of Bentham's utilitarianism: and not just the Bentham who propounded the principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number," but also the Bentham who applauded the proceedings of the Star Chamber, advocated the imprisonment of beggars, defended torture, and devised the "Panopticon"—a machine, he said, for "grinding rogues honest"—to keep miscreants under constant surveillance.[1] Liberty was always on Mill's lips; a new orthodoxy was ever in his heart. There is an important sense in which the libertarian streak in *On Liberty* is little more than a prophylactic against the coerciveness that its assumption of virtuous rationality presupposes.

Such "paradoxes" (to put it politely) show themselves whenever the constructive part of Mill's doctrine is glimpsed through his cheerleading for freedom and eccentricity. Mill's doctrine of liberty begins with a promise of emancipation: the individual, in order to construct a "life plan" worthy of his nature, must shed the carapace of inherited opinion. He must learn to subject all his former beliefs to rational scrutiny. He must dare to be "eccentric," "novel," "original." At the same time, Mill notes, not without misgiving, that

> As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase; the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested. The cessation, on one question after another, of serious controversy is one of the necessary incidents of the consolidation of opinion—a consolidation as salutary in the case of true opinions as it is dangerous and noxious when the opinions are erroneous.

In other words, the partisan of Millian liberalism undertakes the destruction of inherited custom and belief in order to construct a bulwark of custom and belief that can be inherited. As he put it in his *Autobiography* (posthumously published in 1873),

> I looked forward, through the present age of loud disputes but generally weak convictions, to a future . . . [in which] convictions as to what is right and wrong, useful and pernicious, [will be] deeply engraven on the feelings by early education and general unanimity of sentiment, and so firmly grounded in reason and in the true exigencies of life, that they shall not, like all former and present creeds, religious, ethical, and political, require to be periodically thrown off and replaced by others.

So: a "unanimity of sentiment" (a.k.a. custom) is all well and good as long as it is grounded in the "true exigencies of life"—as defined, of course, by J. S. Mill.

One measure of Mill's triumph is that the "unanimity" of sentiment that he looked forward to has long since been all but achieved. Not that Mill has lacked critics. On the contrary, from the very beginning both his utilitarianism and his doctrine of liberty have been subjected to searching, indeed devastating, criticism. That they not only survived but also thrived is a testament to—among other things—the beguiling power of Mill's rhetoric and the seductive spell of his core doctrines. On the principle that sooner or later reality must vanquish illusion, however, it is worth revisiting certain criticisms of Mill's liberalism. Repetition of an old truth may eventually dislodge even stubborn new falsehoods.

By far the most concentrated and damaging single attack on Mill's liberalism is *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, first published serially in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1872–1873, and then in book form in March 1873 in the last year of Mill's life. It was written by the lawyer, judge, and journalist Sir James Fitzjames Stephen (1829–1894): Leslie Stephen's older brother and hence—such is the

1 See pages 33–35 in *The Economics of Justice* by Richard A. Posner (Harvard University Press, 1981).

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irony of history—Virginia Woolf's uncle. Mill himself never responded to Stephen's book beyond observing, as Leslie Stephen reports in his excellent biography of his brother, that he thought the book "more likely to repel than attract." But several of Mill's disciples responded—the most famous of whom was the liberal politician and journalist John Morley (1838–1923). Stephen brought out a second edition of his book the following year, 1874, in which he reproduces and replies to many criticisms raised by Morley and others. Stephen described *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* as "mainly controversial and negative." *Pugnacious* and *devastating* would be equally appropriate adjectives. As one commentator put it, Stephen made "mincemeat" of Mill. And when it appeared, the book sparked a lively controversy, rousing, as Leslie Stephen noted, "the anger of some, the sympathy of others, and the admiration of all who liked to see hard hitting on any side of a great question." And yet for nearly one hundred years *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* disappeared almost without a trace. After 1874, it was not republished until Cambridge University Press brought out a new edition in 1967.[2]

Writing in the introduction to the Chicago edition of *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,* Richard Posner described the book as "a magnificent period piece: as vivid and revealing a document of British imperialism in its heyday as John Buchan's novel *Prester John* and Kipling's verse would be a generation later." He was right. Written directly after Stephen completed a stint as Chief Justice of Calcutta, the book is full of the justified confidence of flourishing empire. Stephen saw the great good that the English had brought to India—in health and education, in maintaining civic order, in putting down barbaric customs like suttee; he recognized clearly that following Mill's liberal principles would make carrying out that civilizing mandate difficult if not impossible; and he decided forthrightly that the fault lay with Mill's liberalism, not with civilization.

It is a mistake, however, to regard *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* merely as a "period piece." As Judge Posner acknowledges, it is also "an audacious and radical challenge to classical liberalism." The challenge is all the more audacious because it emerged from ground very close to Mill. Stephen was himself a Liberal (though one of conservative temperament) and a utilitarian of decidedly undoctrinaire persuasion. He comments at one point that "Bentham's whole conception of happiness as something which could, as it were, be served out in rations, is open to great objection." Stephen was too moral to be a strict utilitarian, too pragmatic to abandon that philosophy altogether. Leslie Stephen described him as "at once a Puritan and a Utilitarian," which seems about right. Stephen was also an ardent admirer of many aspects of Mill's philosophy; early on in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* he called Mill "a great man to whom I am in every way indebted." He had even reviewed *On Liberty* warmly in the *Saturday Review* when it first appeared. But in time he came to regard Mill's doctrine of liberty—and the apotheosis of an abstract equality and fraternity that flows from it—as an unmitigated disaster. *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* explains why.

Judge Posner describes as "naughty" Stephen's decision to adopt the revolutionary motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" as the title of a book about Millian liberalism. But that is perhaps because his sympathies on many issues are closer to Mill's than to Stephen's. In fact, the title is perfect. As Stephen explains in his opening pages, the book is an effort to examine "the doctrines which are rather hinted at than expressed by the phrase 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.'"

2 The Cambridge edition, with notes by R. J. White, has since gone out of print. But that text, edited and with a new introduction by the legal philosopher Richard A. Posner, was reprinted by the University of Chicago in 1991. Another edition, edited and with an introduction by Stuart D. Warner, was published by Liberty Fund in 1993.

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Although that phrase had its origin in the French Revolution, it nonetheless had come to express "the creed of a religion," one "less definite than most forms of Christianity, but not on that account the less powerful." On the contrary, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" epitomized "one of the most penetrating influences of the day," namely the "Religion of Humanity"—the secular, socialistic alternative to Christianity put forward in different ways by thinkers like Auguste Comte, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. "It is one of the commonest beliefs of the day," Stephen wrote, "that the human race collectively has before it splendid destinies of various kinds, and that the road to them is to be found in the removal of all restraints on human conduct, in the recognition of a substantial equality between all human creatures, and in fraternity in general." Taking *On Liberty*, *The Subjection of Women*, and *Utilitarianism* (1863) as his primary texts, Stephen shows in tonic detail why these beliefs are mistaken and, if put into practice, are bound to result in moral chaos and widespread personal unhappiness.

Among other things, the phrase "liberty, equality, fraternity" suggests the immense rhetorical advantage that liberalism begins with. One can hardly criticize the slogan without arousing the suspicion that one must be a partisan of oppression, servitude, and dissension. "Liberty," Stephen notes, "is a eulogistic word." Therein lies its magic. Substitute a neutral synonym—"permission," for example, or "leave" (as in "I give you leave to go")—and the spell is broken: the troops will not rally. It is the same with *equality* and *fraternity*. The eulogistic aspect of liberalism means that its critics are practically required to begin with an apology. So it is hardly surprising that Stephen notes at the beginning of his book that he is "not the advocate of Slavery, Caste, and Hatred" and that there is a sense in which he, too, can endorse the phrase "liberty, equality, fraternity."

The problem is that Mill and other advocates of the Religion of Humanity have exaggerated the advantages and minimized the disadvantages that these qualities involve. For one thing, Stephen points out, they are far too abstract to form the basis of anything like a religion. They are also inherently disestablishing with regard to existing social arrangements; that indeed is one reason they exert so great an appeal for the radical sensibility. Take Mill's doctrine of liberty, which boils down to the exhortation: Let every one please himself in any way he likes so long as he does not hurt his neighbor. According to Mill, any moral system that aimed at more—to benefit the moral character of society at large or the individuals in it—would be wrong in principle. But this, Stephen notes, would "condemn every existing system of morals."

> Strenuously preach and rigorously practise the doctrine that our neighbor's private character is nothing to us, and the number of unfavorable judgments formed, and therefore the number of inconveniences inflicted by them can be reduced as much as we please, and the province of liberty can be enlarged in corresponding ratio. Does any reasonable man wish for this? Could anyone desire gross licentiousness, monstrous extravagance, ridiculous vanity, or the like, to be unnoticed, or, being known, to inflict no inconveniences which can possibly be avoided?

As Stephen dryly observes, pace Mill, "the custom of looking upon certain courses of conduct with aversion is the essence of morality."

The great pragmatic lesson to be drawn from *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* concerns the relation between freedom and power. "Power," Stephen insists, "precedes liberty"—that is, "liberty, from the very nature of things, is dependent upon power; and . . . it is only under the protection of a powerful, well-organized, and intelligent government that any liberty can exist at all." It is for this reason that it makes no sense to ask whether liberty *tout court* is a good thing. The question whether liberty is a good or bad thing, Stephen wrties, "is as irrational as the ques-

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tion whether fire is a good or bad thing. It is both good and bad according to time, place, and circumstance." Mill's failure to recognize these truths endows his doctrine of liberty with extraordinary malleability. It also infuses it with an air of unreality whenever it approaches the problem of freedom in everyday life. It is axiomatic with Mill that "society has no business *as* society to decide anything to be wrong which concerns only the individual." It follows, Mill writes, that "fornication, for example, must be tolerated and so must gambling." But should a person be free to be a pimp? Or to keep a gambling house? Mill thinks these are exceptionally difficult questions:

> Although the public, or the State are not warranted in authoritatively deciding, for purposes of repression or punishment, that such or such conduct affecting only the interests of the individual is good or bad, they are fully justifed in assuming, if they regard it as bad, that its being so or not is at least a disputable question: That, this being supposed, they cannot be acting wrongly in endeavoring to exclude the influence of solicitations which are not disinterested, of instigators who cannot possibly be impartial—who have a direct personal interest on one side, and that the side which the State believes to be wrong, and who confessedly promote it for personal objects only.

To which Stephen replies: "There is a kind of ingenuity which carries its own refutation on its face. How can the State or the public be competent to determine any question whatever if it is not competent to decide that gross vice is a bad thing? I do not," Stephen continues,

> think the State ought to stand bandying compliments with pimps. "Without offence to your better judgment, dear sir, and without presuming to set up my opinion against yours, I beg to observe that I am entitled for certain purposes to treat the question whether your views of life are right as one which admits of two opinions. I am far from expressing absolute condemnation of an experiment in living from which I dissent, . . . but still I am compelled to observe that you are not altogether unbiased by personal considerations. . . ." My feeling is that if society gets its grip on the collar of such a fellow it should say to him, "You dirty rascal, it may be a question whether you should be suffered to remain in your native filth untouched, or whether my opinion about you should be printed by the lash on your bare back. That question will be determined without the smallest reference to your wishes or feelings; but as to the nature of my opinion about you, there can be no question at all."

The contrast of tone between Mill and Stephen could not be more graphic. And here we approach a subject that has become almost undiscussable. As Stephen noted in his letters, there was a peculiar "want of virility" about Mill. In part it was a matter of abstractedness: Mill seemed to him "comparable to a superlatively crammed senior wrangler, whose body has been stunted by his brains." He was "too much a calculating machine and too little of a human being." But besides abstractedness, there was also an element of what Leslie Stephen called "feminine tenderness" about Mill: his character, his prose, his doctrines. It is not, I think, coincidental that one senses something similar in Rousseau: a smothering fussiness, grown rancorous and paranoid in Rousseau's case, merely querulous and impertinent in Mill's. The "feminization of society" we occasionally read about is in this sense a coefficient of the triumph of liberalism. Its distrust of masculine directness is the other side of its inveterate impulse to moralize all social activity.

This stereoscopic quality in Mill's doctrine of liberty shows itself in other ways as well. One moment it seems to license unrestrained liberty; the next moment, it seems to sanction the most sweeping coercion. When Stephen says that "the great defect" of Mill's doctrine of liberty is that it implies "too favorable an estimate of human nature," we know exactly what he means.

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Mill writes as if people, finally awakened to their rational interests, would put aside all petty concerns and devote themselves to "lofty minded" relationships and the happiness of mankind in general. "He appears to believe," Stephen writes with barely concealed incredulity, "that if men are all freed from restraints and put, as far as possible, on an equal footing, they will naturally treat each other as brothers, and work together harmoniously for their common good." At the same time, Mill's estimation of actually existing men and women is very unfavorable. "Ninety-nine in a hundred", he tells us, act in ignorance of their real motives. He is always going on about "wretched social arrangements," the bad state of society, and the general pettiness of his contemporaries. In this respect, too, he resembles Rousseau, who late in life confessed that "I think I know man, but as for men, I know them not."

In fact, when it comes to his view of mankind, Mill vacillates between the two caricatures: a pretty one and a repulsive one (actually, they are both pretty repulsive, though in different ways). The friction between the two produces an illusion of benevolence; that illusion is at the heart of liberalism's appeal. Yet what Mill describes is an ideal that, in proportion as it is realized, tends to grow into its opposite. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill writes that "as between his own happiness and that of others, justice requires [everyone] to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator." Stephen comments: "If this be so, I can only say that nearly the whole of nearly every human creature is one continued course of injustice, for nearly everyone passes his life in providing the means of happiness for himself and those who are closely connected with him, leaving others all but entirely out of account." And this, Stephen argues, is as it should be, not merely for prudential but for moral reasons:

> The man who works from himself outwards, whose conduct is governed by ordinary motives, and who acts with a view to his own advantage and the advantage of those who are connected with himself in definite, assignable ways, produces in the ordinary course of things much more happiness to others . . . than a moral Don Quixote who is always liable to sacrifice himself and his neighbors. On the other hand, a man who has a disinterested love of the human race—that is to say, who has got a fixed idea about some way of providing for the management of the concerns of mankind—is an unaccountable person . . . who is capable of making his love for men in general the ground of all sorts of violence against men in particular.

"The real truth," Stephen concludes, "is that the human race is so big, so various, so little known, that no one can really love it."

Mill's refusal to recognize this is a standing invitation to irony. His attitude reminds one of W. H. Auden's version of the social worker's ethic: "We're all on earth to help others. What on earth the others are here for, we don't know." Truth in advertising should have required *On Liberty* to begin with the words, "Once upon a time. . . ." Although written by a learned man and talented philosopher, there is a sense in which it really belongs more to the genre of fantasy than moral philosophy. It says a number of emollient things about human capabilities, but outlines a moral-political system more or less guaranteed to stymie those capabilties.

Consider Mill's paeans to the value of eccentricity, diversity, and originality as solvents of "the tyranny of opinion." Doubtless he is sincere in his eulogies. But the growth of equalizing liberty as he envisions it would tend to homogenize society and hence to reduce genuine originality and individuality. Mill's philosophy declares originality desirable even as it works to make it impossible. In a memorable analogy, Stephen says that Mill's notion of liberty as a politically "progressive" imperative in combination with his demand for originality is "like plucking a bird's feathers in order to put it on a level with beasts, and then telling

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it to fly." Furthermore, by confounding, as Stephen puts it, the proposition that "variety is good with the proposition that goodness is various," Mill's teaching tends to encourage a shallow worship of mere variety, diversity for its own sake with no regard for the nature and quality of expressions of diversity. This is obviously a lesson we still have not learned. Notwithstanding the slogans of our cultural commissars, "diversity" itself is neither good nor bad. Signs announcing a "commitment to diversity" that one sees at college campuses and businesses across the country are so nauseating precisely because they are little more than badges announcing their own virtue. The odor of political correctness emanating from them is the odor of unearned self-satisfaction.

In *On Liberty*, Mill says that "exceptional individuals . . . should be encouraged in acting differently from the mass" in order that they might "point the way" for the rest of us. But Stephen is right that "if this advice were followed, we should have as many little oddities in manner and behaviour as we have people who wish to pass for men of genius. Eccentricity is far more often a mark of weakness than a mark of strength. Weakness wishes, as a rule, to attract attention by trifling distinctions, strength wishes to avoid it. Originality consists in thinking for yourself, not in thinking differently from other people." It is part of Mill's polemical purpose to claim that society hitherto had persecuted eccentricity out of fear and small-mindedness. But again Stephen is surely right that "it would be hard to show that the great reformers of the world have been persecuted for 'eccentricity.' They were persecuted because their doctrines were disliked, rightly or wrongly as the case may be. The difference between Mr. Mill's views and mine is that he instinctively assumes that whatever is is wrong. I say, try each case on its merits."

Stephen's recourse to the particular—he would have cited his allegiance to utilitarian principles of expediency—infuses his discussion of the relation between liberty and power with robust commonsense. It also sets it sharply at odds with Mill's treatment of those issues. In one of the most famous passages in *On Liberty*, Mill outlines what he thinks are the limits of acceptable interference in an individual's "liberty of action."

> The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.

Mill goes on to add various qualifications. He notes, for example, that this license applies only to "human beings in the maturity of their faculties," not to "children or young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood." He further notes, in a passage that has caused great hand-wringing among his disciples, that "despotism is a legitimate form of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement." But—and here is the nub of his argument restated—"as soon as mankind have attained the capacity of being guided to their own improvement by conviction or persuasion (a period long since reached in all nations with whom we need here concern ourselves), compulsion is no longer admissible as a means to their own good, and is justifiable only for the security of others."

Mill's description of his "one very simple principle" shows the extent to which his liberalism rests, as the philosopher Roger Scruton put it in *The Meaning of Conservatism* (second edition, 1984), on a "gener-

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alization of the first-person point of view." His elevation of the "I" is also a movement of abstraction. One of the first things one notices about Mill's "individuals" is how little air there is around them. They exist as flat, abstract cut-outs. Arguing for the relativity of moral values, Mill notes that "the same causes which make [someone] a churchman in London would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Peking." But this is to take an entirely disembodied view of the relevant "causes." Part of what makes (or once made) someone a churchgoer in London is living in London; that is not an "accidental" datum that can be subtracted without cost from an individual's identity. Our culture and history are essential ingredients: remove them and you remove the individual. Individuality is not fungible.

Mill's assumptions about the nature of individuality stand at the heart of his liberalism. In the first place, it is by no means clear that we have knowledge (in Stephen's paraphrase) of any "very simple principles as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control." Mill's bland language conceals an extraordinary, and unjustified, presumption. In the second place, Stephen notes, Mill's famous distinction between "self-regarding" and "other-regarding" acts is "radically vicious. It assumes that some acts regard the agent only, and that some regard other people. In fact, by far the most important part of our conduct regards both ourselves and others."

As Stephen observes, "men are so closely connected together that it is quite impossible to say how far the influence of acts apparently of the most personal character may extend." The splendid isolation that Mill's imperative requires is a chimera. For it is a matter of fact that "every human creature is deeply interested not only in the conduct, but in the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of millions of persons who stand in no other assignable relation to him than that of being his fellow-creatures." By broadly excluding the sanctions not only of "legal penalties" but also of "the moral coercion of public opinion," Mill renders his notion of liberty fantastic. Some of Mill's qualifications would seem to concede something to common sense; but they do so at the cost of turning his "one very simple principle" into an utter commonplace. "Either," Stephen observes, Mill means that "superior wisdom is not in every case a reason why one man should control another—which is a mere commonplace—or else [he] means that in all the countries which we are accustomed to call civilised the mass of adults are so well acquainted with their own interests and so much disposed to pursue them that no compulsion or restraint" is ever justified, which is incredible. It is precisely this oscillation between the commonplace and the fantastic that has made Mill's liberalism such a durable commodity. Its radical promise is hedged by common sense qualifications that can be wheeled out when objections are raised and then promptly retired when the work of remaking society is meant to proceed.

Stephen is quick to admit that "if Mr. Mill had limited himself to the proposition that in our own time and country it is highly important that the great questions of morals and theology should be discussed openly and with complete freedom from all legal restraints, I should agree with him." He agrees, too, that "neither legislation nor public opinion ought to be meddlesome," and that "those who have due regard to the incurable weaknesses of human nature will be very careful how they inflict penalties upon mere vice, or even upon those who make a trade of promoting it, unless special circumstances call for their infliction." But he goes on to note that it is "one thing . . . to tolerate vice so long as it is inoffensive, and quite another to give it a legal right not only to exist, but to assert itself in the face of the world as an 'experiment in living' as good as another, and entitled to the same protection from the law."

Mill's "one very simple principle" depends on a variety of assumptions about

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human nature and the way moral life ought to be conducted. Above all, it depends on a notably anemic view of moral life: one in which the sociocultural fabric that gives body to freedom is redefined as the enemy of freedom and the acutal process of moral choice is turned into a process of frigid ratiocination. Mill's view of liberty is at once far too simplistic and far too rigorous. It is simplistic in its demonization of the customary and conventional; it is overly rigorous in its demand that moral choices be arrived at through "the collision of adverse opinions": "on no other terms," Mill says, "can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right." To deny this—to think that sanctions, even the sanctions of negative public opinion, ought to be otherwise enjoined—"is to assume our own infallibility."

Against this, Stephen points out that "the incalculable majority of mankind form their opinions" not by a process of ratiocination but out of a network of transmitted custom, prejudice, and conventional practice. "Doctrines come home to most people in general, not if and in so far as they are free to discuss all their applications, but if and in so far as they happen to interest them and appear to illustrate and interpret their own experience." Furthermore, on the issue of infallibility, Stephen points out that there are innumerable propositions about which we have rational assurance, even though we do not claim infallibility. "There are plenty of reasons for not forbidding people to deny the existence of London Bridge and the river Thames, but the fear that the proof of those propositions would be weakened or that the person making the law would claim infallibility is not among the number."

Mill hoped that his regime of liberty would replace the reign of prejudice with the reign of reason. In fact, it has had the effect of camouflaging prejudices with the rhetoric of reason. And the effort to unseat customary practice and belief has had the effect not, as Mill predicted, of encouraging a drift toward unanimity but of increasing chaos. This is not surprising: as Stephen noted, "the notorious result of unlimited freedom of thought and discussion is to produce general scepticism on many subjects in the vast majority of minds." But such are the paradoxes generated by Mill's liberalism.

Today, we are living with the institutionalization of those paradoxes—above all, perhaps, the paradox that in aiming to achieve a society that is maximally tolerant we at the same time give (in David Stove's words) "maximum scope to the activities of those who have set themselves to achieve the maximally-intolerant society." More importantly, we also paralyze our powers of resistance. That paralysis is the secret poison at the heart of Mill's liberalism. Stephen noted that Mill's "very simple principle" that coercive public opinion ought to be exercised only for self-protective purposes was "a paradox so startling that it is almost impossible to argue against." He was right. As Maurice Cowling observed, "to argue with Mill, in Mill's terms, is to concede defeat. *Rational* does not *have* to mean conclusions reached by critical self-examination. *Prejudice* may reasonably be used to mean commitments about which argument has been declined, but to decline argument is not in itself *irrational*. *Bigotry* and *prejudice* are not necessarily the best descriptions of opinions which Comtean determinism has stigmatized as historically outdated."

Mill claimed a monopoly on the word "rational." So long as that monopoly remains unchallenged our paralysis will be complete. The antidote to the moral helplessness that Mill's liberalism generates is not to be found by digging deeper in the trench of liberal rationalization. On the contrary, it begins with the forthright recognition that no "one very simple principle" can relieve us of the duties we owe to the inhabited world that we, for this brief while, share with many others.

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Pink pigeons & blue mayonnaise

by Joseph Epstein

I have a weakness for minor artists. But they must be genuinely minor, by which I mean that they mustn't lapse into minority through overreaching, want of energy, crudity, or any other kind of ineptitude. They must not be failed major artists merely. The true minor artist eschews the noble and the solemn. He fears tedium for his audience, but even more for himself. He sets out to be, and is perfectly content to remain, less than great. The minor artist knows his limits and lives comfortably within them. To delight, to charm, to entertain, such are the goals the minor artist sets himself, and, when brought off with style and verve and elegant lucidity, they are—more than sufficient—wholly admirable.

Gerald Tyrwhitt-Wilson (1883–1950), the fourteenth Lord Berners, was the very model of the minor artist, a title he would, I think, neither disclaim nor disdain. He painted, he wrote, he composed (for Diaghilev but also for the movies), and he didn't in the least mind being called an amateur or a dilettante, and on occasion declared himself both. When Max Beerbohm rendered Lord Berners at his piano in a caricature—nicely capturing his bald pate, his monocle, the careful mustache beneath his beaky nose—the caption read: "Lord Berners making more sweetness than violence." This was Berners's aim, sweetness and light, though in the correct mixture, which meant, of course, not too much of either.

Gerald Berners is a man who tends to show up in other people's memoirs, letters, and diaries. He generally does so in a somewhat oblique fashion, arriving late, leaving early, never the life of but always a guest at the party. He was part of English smart bohemia, where society and art met—a member of that group of English writers, critics, and composers who came into prominence in the 1920s and gave the prevailing tone to English culture until the early 1950s. His name pops up alongside those of John Betjeman, Duff and Diana Cooper, the Mitford girls, Cecil Beaton, Peter Quennell, Cyril Connolly, David Cecil. Thus, Evelyn Waugh to his friend Christopher Sykes: "I sought you in White's on Tuesday but found only Berners." Thus, Diana Cooper, in her autobiography: "At Augsburg we joined Emerald Cunard, Gerald Berners, Bertie Abdy, and others." Berners himself brings H. G. Wells and the Baroness Budberg to the Betjemans, and Elsa Schiaparelli to a jumble sale. Harold Nicolson mentions Berners, fleetingly, in *Some People*. Among the Sitwells, Isaiah Berlin, Siegfried Sassoon, Harold Acton, and David Cecil, there, off in a corner, ubiquitous and omnipresent, sits Lord Berners. Who was this man?

A clear answer is now available owing to the biography of Berners by Mark Amory.[1] Literary editor of the London *Spectator*,

1 *Lord Berners: The Last Eccentric*, by Mark Amory; Chatto and Windus, 237 pages, £20.

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Amory has edited the letters of Evelyn Waugh and those of Ann Fleming, and knows well the terrain upon which Berners romped. Mr. Amory's is a book written with a nice combination of sophistication, knowledge, and good sense. At 237 pages long—with fewer than twenty further pages given over to bibliography and appendices—it is also rightly, one is inclined to say just about perfectly, proportioned.

Rightly proportioned, too, is the degree of Mr. Amory's psychologizing. Lord Berners was odd—and more than a little odd, for his reputation in his own day was that of an eccentric. But he is not presented here all lashed up in psychological interpretation. Mr. Amory, as a literary psychologist, uses a light hand. "The reader of his autobiography [*First Childhood*]," Mr. Amory writes, "is given no hint that Gerald himself is to be exclusively homosexual. . . . All this suggests only that Gerald, who was to live openly with a man for almost twenty years, was capable of being mildly disingenuous to the end." Enough said, and Mr. Amory himself duly says very little more about it, either by way of approval or disapproval, taking his subject's homosexuality as a fact of life, worthy neither of interpretation or speculation.

A composer, painter, and novelist, Gerald Berners was what we should, in an inflationary age, probably today call a Renaissance man. But in Berners's case you have to imagine rather a small renaissance: one in Andorra, perhaps. A shy boy who later became a shy man, he did not go to Oxbridge, but instead was removed from Eton to study for—and twice fail—the examination for the diplomatic service. No disgrace, this failure, for, with its concentration on foreign languages and history, it seems to have been much more rigorous than sitting for the standard university examination of the day. He was in any case sent as an honorary attaché to Constantinople, where Harold Nicolson was also posted.

Berners's next posting was at Rome, where he met and befriended Ronald Firbank: an instance of the shy meeting the terminally shy. "The flashes of brilliance that animated his conversation and made his company so delightful are impossible to reconstruct," Berners later wrote. "One might as well attempt to record the hovering of a humming-bird or portray the opalescence of a soap-bubble. There was an intriguing irrelevance, a delightful, fantastic silliness in all he said or did." In his own career, Berners would not be without his own Firbankian flashes.

Gerald Berners grew up, an only child, in rather stuffy, late Victorian opulence. His mother, who was, by his own account, utterly without a sense of humor, loved him; his father, who had a caustic sense of humor, did not. In *First Childhood*, he recalls his mother instructing his father to beat him for some delinquency or other, and his father saying that he was busy and couldn't be bothered. ("I remember," Berners notes, "feeling a little offended by his lack of interest.") Berners believed his father also did not care all that much for his wife, but then "he did not seem to be the kind of man who could ever have been seriously in love with anyone." His mother would much have preferred Gerald excel at horsemanship than anything else, and rather discouraged his early passion for music. Neither parent had a clue about what interested their son, which was fine with him. At preparatory school, his headmaster warned him not to allow his music to get in the way of his studies. Such an upbringing, if one survives it, leaves one with a sense of detachment and distance that can have its artistic uses. But his upbringing also had its sadness. In *First Childhood*, Berners wrote:

> Those who say that their childhood was the happiest period in their lives must, one suspects, have been the victims of perpetual misfortune in later years. For there is no reason to suppose that the period of childhood is inevitably happier than any other. The only thing for which children are to be envied is their exuberant vitality. This is apt to be mistaken for happiness. For true happiness, however, there must be a certain degree of ex-

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> perience. The ordinary pleasures of childhood are similar to those of a dog when it is given its dinner or taken out for a walk, a behavioristic, tail-wagging business, and, as for childhood being carefree, I know from my own experience, that black care can sit behind us even on our rocking-horses.

Berners came into his title, money, and property in 1918, when he was thirty-five. Out of the financial wars, he would never again have to worry about earning his own income. He kept houses in Rome and London, but was most often at home—and most at home generally—in Faringdon, his estate in Berkshire. A less intellectually distinguished crew gathered there than at Lady Ottoline Morrell's, though it was a much more amusing one. Here it was that Berners earned his reputation as an eccentric. He dyed the pigeons around Faringdon bright colors (using a dye that did them no harm). He had an occasional penchant for monochromatic meals. Stravinsky recalled that "if Lord Berners's mood was pink, lunch might consist of beet soup, lobster, tomatoes, strawberries," with pink pigeons flying outside; Stravinsky's wife sent Berners a powder that allowed him to make blue mayonnaise. He built a so-called "folly," an isolated tower with no reason for being other than his desire to have it built, and to it he appended the notice: "Members of the Public committing suicide from this tower do so at their own risk." He allowed Penelope Betjeman's horse Moti into his drawing-room for tea. (Mr. Amory prints a picture of the horse sipping tea out of his mistress's saucer at Faringdon.) He installed a portable piano in the back of his Rolls-Royce. As befits such behavior, Berners's outward demeanor was utterly conventional; he wore suits with vests and bow ties, even when painting.

Shy though he was, Berners said many witty things, a goodly number happily recorded by Mark Amory. Berners it was who said that T. E. Lawrence seemed "always backing into the limelight." He claimed to have gone to the House of Lords once only, because a bishop "stole my umbrella and I never went there again." When an Australian newspaper claimed that it was sad to see the once noble city of Venice full of beggars, Berners offered the corrective that it was a misprint and supposed to read "buggers." He invented frivolous riddles, of which Mr. Amory quotes the following: "if the clocks were to feel that they had no one to talk to or keep them going, what publisher would they refer to? Answer: we have no one to Chatto and Windus." Sometimes his wit could take a socially cruel (if still amusing) turn. He sent the following invitation to Sybil Colefax, who was noted for her social climbing:

> I wonder if by any chance you are free to dine tomorrow night? It is only a tiny party for Winston and GBS. I think it important they should get together at this moment. There will be no one else except for Toscanini and myself. Do please forgive this terribly short notice.

The joke came in Berners making both the signatory of this note and the address on the envelope excruciatingly illegible. Poor Sybil Colefax.

Analyzing Gerald seemed to be a game Berners's friends all took a hand at playing. The best efforts were made in the fiction of his friends. Berners is Lord Merlin in Nancy Mitford's *Pursuit of Love*, where he plays a cameo role as an eccentric and a host for the world of smart bohemia (not much invention here). Of Merlin, the Nancy Mitford-like narrator remarks: "As Lord Merlin was a famous practical joker, it was sometimes difficult to know where jokes ended and culture began. I think he was not always certain himself."

Berners is at the center of Osbert Sitwell's story "The Love-Bird," where, as the character Robert Mainwroth, Sitwell subjects him to extended analysis. "To those who did not care for him, Robert Mainwroth gave an impression of being a scoffer, one who was rather eccentric and outside life.

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To those, on the other hand, who liked him—and, as his sensitiveness gradually evolved round itself the defensive armour of a perfect but laughing worldliness, they formed a steadily increasing band—he was a pivot of very modern, if mocking activity." The element of gentle mockery, I think, is the key one.

There is further talk of Mainwroth-Berners's "natural air of quiet, ugly distinction." Sitwell adds that "he was, in fact, a dilettante, but one in the best sense: for he aspired to be nothing but what he was." He could be happy for long periods, for he was not often bored, "and made a continual use of his continual leisure: in addition to writing and painting, he read an enormous amount." Yet "there is little doubt that he was pleased at having created this false impression of brutal lack of sentiment." He is a man, Sitwell avers, who tended to "divest himself of everything that did not appeal to him personally, either aesthetically or through humour—and his senses of aesthetics and humour were perilously akin."

Osbert Sitwell has it right when he says that it is humor that furnished Lord Berners with his aesthetic and that is behind so much of his art. As for that art, although he took immense pleasure in creative work, Berners referred to his endeavors in this line as "my little hobbies, writing, painting, and music." Although his oeuvre is small, it is, in its modest way, impressive. Stravinsky called Berners the most interesting British composer of the twentieth century; Clive Bell wrote the introduction to the catalogue of his one show of paintings; he had a ballet, *The Triumph of Neptune*, produced by Diaghilev and choreographed by Balanchine; he published poems in *Horizon*; he wrote an opera, plays, six slender novels, and two autobiographical works.

Had he not been wealthy, Berners would doubtless have turned out much more. "I don't feel very inspired at the moment," he wrote to Diaghilev. "However I bought a very pretty Renoir this morning and I hope things will now go much better." Although Berners's greatest promise was as a composer, at one point the pleasure he took from his music departed, and so he turned to painting. According to Virginia Woolf, in her diary, Berners "met a painter, asked him how you paint; bought 'hogsheads'—(meant hogs' bristles) and canvas and copied an Italian picture, brilliantly, consummately, says Clive Bell. Has the same facility there [as in his music]: but it will come to nothing he said, like the other." To walk away from something one is very good at seems a strange act, but perhaps it is less strange if one's purpose in life is, above all, to elude boredom.

Yet it's difficult not to be impressed with Berners's prowess at musical composition, especially given how little actual training he had. His attraction to music, he wrote in *A Distant Prospect*, the second of his two brief autobiographical volumes, was initially to "the sight of musical notation on the page"—he was attracted to it, that is, "pictorially." Apart from rather rudimentary piano lessons as a boy, his only other instruction appears to have been four sessions on counterpoint taken with Donald Tovey. He seemed to show genuine progress as a composer, at least enough to earn the support of the great London *Times* critic Ernest Newman, who had earlier been a detractor. Much of this was owing to Berners's quite marvelously lucid grasp of what lay behind artistic problems. Mark Amory quotes from an unpublished Berners essay that shows how much the cerebral and highly conscious musical artist he could be:

> There are no hard and fast rules to determine the exact length a piece of music should be; nor are there canons to govern the timing of entries, the length of development or the exact amount of suspense to be inflicted on the ear before it is relieved by resolution. These are matters which depend on the tact and sensibility of the composer. If he is lacking in this sensibility, the music that he produces is apt to be unsatisfactory in that, if he errs on the side of length, it will seem to drag; if on the side of brevity, it will appear spasmodic or trivial.

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Berners had a quick musical intelligence, owing in part to his general aesthetic sophistication. He has been called the English Satie, though Satie, Mr. Amory notes, was less than pleased about this, saying Berners was an amateur. I have not heard all of his music, but all that I have been able to acquire on compact disc gives pleasure. It is lively, high spirited, often parodic, and filled with witty surprises of the kind light—but still serious—music ought to provide. It is never tedious. An important quality, the absence of tedium. In his novel *Far from the Madding War*, Berners has a character who is a composer (supposedly modelled on William Walton) and who has written a symphony that lasts an hour and a half, of which another character (one modelled on Berners himself) remarks: "Francis believed in catharsis through boredom."

I have never seen a painting by Gerald Berners. In his book Mark Amory provides rather poorly reproduced versions of a few of them along with some of his illustrations for books and sheet music. Amory is not very high on Berners the visual artist. Nor was Evelyn Waugh, who, with his customary charity, wrote to a friend: "Gerald Berners had an exhibition of pictures and sold them all on the first day which shows what a good thing it is to be a baron." The consensus seems to have been that Berners's painting was rather too predictable. Christopher Wood, a younger painter, noted that he found Berners's work "just too perfect." Amory quotes a reviewer in the magazine *Apollo*: "One views his pictures with delight, only tempered by regret that being so good they are not just a little better. . . ." "Too perfect," "so good"—it sounds, Berners's condition as a visual artist does, like an incurable case of want of inspiration.

As a prose writer, Berners is more impressive. He was the product here of literary self-cultivation. David Cecil said Gerald Berners was the best-read man he had ever met. As he grew older, his reading narrowed. "Are you a reader of Henry James?" Berners asked a friend, "I read practically nothing else now." Yet Berners did not at all write like James. His writing tended to be plain, traditional, a model of ironic understatement. A not untypical sentence from *First Childhood* reads: "The only real drawback to the school [his preparatory school] was the fact that the headmaster happened to be a sadist." He had, as Mr. Amory says, "a gift for being pleasurably readable."

Lord Berners's bibliography includes eight books. Two are autobiographies, the second of which, *A Distant Prospect*, takes his life only up to his departure from Eton. Six are works of fiction. All are quite brief, some fewer than a hundred pages. Until very recently, all were out of print.[2] The most difficult to acquire remains the novel called *The Girls of Radcliffe Hall*. This is a highly campy performance intended for private circulation in which many of Berners's friends are turned into girls and Berners himself into the headmistress of a girls school in which everyone has a crush on someone else. For people in the know, Mark Amory writes, it was a roman with a very clear and patently homosexual clef. The hero/heroine of the story, Cecil Beaton, was said to have been so angered by it, Mr. Amory reports, "that he went round acquiring copies and destroying them, in an attempt to suppress it."

A more characteristic performance is Berners's novel *Far from the Madding War*. Mr. Amory calls the plot of this delicate novella "slender, indeed inadequate." All the more interesting, therefore, that it is charming and delightfully readable. It is written, to use a musical term, with perfect pitch. Lend an ear, please, to this, its opening paragraph:

> Miss Emmeline Pocock sat, intently bending

2 Berners's two autobiographical writings have now been reprinted in handsome paperback editions by the Turtle Point Press and Helen Marx Books (*First Childhood*, 243 pages, $14.95 & *A Distant Prospect*, 186 pages, $12.95). They will also be issuing Berners's *Tales and Fantasies* in Spring, 1999.

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> over a large piece of embroidery, surrounded by good taste and silence. The room she sat in was as elegantly appointed a room as anyone could wish to see, although a highly attuned connoissance of decorative subtleties might detect, here and there, a blemish: a somewhat too deliberate juxtaposition of objects; colour arrangements that envisaged artistic ideals without quite achieving them. But, on the whole, the general effect was one of harmony, discretion, lack of pretentiousness, and there was none of that absence of comfort that good taste so often entails.

Emmeline is the daughter of the Warden of All Saints College, and the novel opens as World War Two has just begun. She hates the idea of war, with its great destruction, but feels that, like everyone else, she must do something for the war effort. What she decides to do is to unravel, knot by knot, stitch by stitch, a large fourteenth century German embroidery that is in her possession. "Focussing a swivel lamp on a corner of the embroidery, she took up a small pair of scissors and, drawing up a chair, she sat down before it and began slowly, deliberately to unravel the tiny threads of silk, offering a mental prayer to God to grant her the requisite strength to persevere in her minute labour of destruction until not a single thread remained of this unique, almost monumental work of art." And, you might think, we are off.

Except we are not, for not much happens in the novel. Chiefly characters are wheeled in and out, mined for their comic content. Early among them is one Professor Trumble, a very great bore whom Emmeline wishes would undergo a reverse psychoanalysis that would give him some social inhibitions. He and his wife's "leave-takings . . . were as protracted as the finale of a Bruckner symphony."

Mr. Jericho appears to be based on Isaiah Berlin, and provides perhaps the last playfully disrespectful portrait of this great English social eminence. He pops up like a cuckoo out of a clock, with eyes, behind large steel-rimmed spectacles, that had "an explanation for everything," missed nothing and "often saw a good many things that weren't there"; he suffers not from the absence but from "an excess of tact." Then there is the inevitable character based on the Oxford classicist Maurice Bowra, who prefers to talk with friends over the telephone, about Greek antiquities, moral philosophy, or local gossip, rather than in person, for over the telephone he was "unable to see his victims wince, he was less tempted to wound, and conversation was carried on in a kinder, less provocative tone."

Far from the Madding War contains a murder and a suicide, but as killings go they are as nothing next to the character analysis exhibited by the novel's author. The most analyzed character in the novel, in fact, is Berners himself, who is called Lord FitzCricket. To him is given the line: "It may well be that the proper study of mankind is man, and the study of mankind is discouraging." Certainly Berners, in this self-portrait, proffers a discouraging picture of himself. He describes himself as "completely bald," so that "when he was annoyed he looked like a diabolical egg." "He composed music, he wrote books, he painted; he did a great many things with a certain facile talent. He was astute enough to realise that, in Anglo-Saxon countries, art is more highly appreciated if accompanied by a certain measure of eccentric publicity. This fitted in well with his natural inclinations."

FitzCricket-Berners goes on to report on the way that the war "poleaxed" him. He ceased composing, writing, painting. The war, he felt, not altogether incorrectly, meant the end of people such as himself. "You see, I'm all the things that are no use in war. My character is essentially pacific and hedonistic. I like everything to be nice and jolly and I hate to think of people hating one another. . . . I'm an amateur, and fundamentally superficial. I am also private spirited. I have never been able to summon up any great enthusiasm for the human race, and I am indifferent as to its future. I have also led a self-centered, sheltered life,

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and my little world consists of my hobbies and personal relationships."

As this passage suggests, the war sent Berners into a royal blue funk from which he never quite emerged. He went into psychoanalysis—in his excellent story "Percy Wallingford," the young diplomatist narrator based on Berners speaks of having suffered from "nervous depression"—but one imagines him too witty for it to have much helped. (People with strong humor don't often do well in therapy. One recalls George S. Kaufman firing his psychotherapist because he asked too many damn personal questions.) He had a relationship with a younger man that lasted twenty years, though one senses that this relationship, though important to him, was never quite at the center of his life. There were rumors that Berners planned to propose to Clarissa Churchill, but nothing ever came of them.

Perhaps Berners's problem was to be found in an emptiness at the center of his outwardly pleasant life. One half feels he might have wished that this emptiness could have been filled by religion, only because the subject of religious faith does come up a fair amount in his published writing. In *A Distant Prospect*, he describes the young intellectual at Eton who "did a good deal to undermine my religious faith," which, he goes on to explain, "had never been a very healthy one." He speaks in the same book of having "no aptitude for religious faith," and of the absence of "any latent talent" for religion. He also allows that he could not "understand in what way suffering fortified the soul."

In *Far from the Madding War*, Berners plays religion for laughs. When Emmeline in that book is asked if she had ever tried to find God, she replies that "I felt I wouldn't know what to do with him if I had found him." She also remarks that, when a child, she "used to think that the Day of Judgment meant that we were all going to judge God, and I still don't see why not." After Penelope Betjeman had converted to Catholicism, she tried to bring Berners into the Church, but it was no sale. "I don't mind Penelope as long as we don't have any of that God nonsense," he told a friend.

After the war, Berners's health and interest in life began to give out, though it is a bit unclear which came first. He felt he had become distinctly a back number. And he was right. Probably always a mistake to attempt to make of one's life a work of art. A life, as opposed to art, wouldn't endure, for one thing; and, for another, old age so rarely supplies a dramatic, or even nicely understated, elegant ending.

Lord Berners, the man who so greatly feared boredom, became, in the recollection of some friends, a bit of a bore himself. He might earlier have contended that pleasure was the true end in life, yet toward the end of his own life he asserted that "the highest pleasure is creative work." As a reader and a listener, I, for one, wish he had exerted himself to have turned out more work. Did, one wonders, he wish it, too?

But life, never without its tricks, had dealt Berners too good a hand. Not needing to work, he could live in luxury and fall back on charm. Berners died, at sixty-six, a fairly easeful death, apparently not in the least fearful of what lay beyond. In the postscript to his excellent biography, Mark Amory reports that the doctor who had attended Lord Berners "during his last years refused to send a bill, saying that the pleasure of his company had been payment enough." Now there is a test of charm none of us would wish to have to pass.

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"Vsyo Normalno"—in Russia

by Jonathan Brent

Russia, it has been truly said, lurches from crisis to crisis. The news today portends many crises to come with many unpredictable outcomes. No single perspective—economic, political, social, historical—explains the reality of this country of Tolstoy and Stalin, Shostakovich and Brezhnev, Herzen and Yeltsin. No one voice—democrat, Communist, fascist, orthodox—speaks for the country of Pushkin and Zhirinovsky. While I waited in Moscow's Sheremetevo airport at *Passportny kontrol*, in what the Russians think a line, but which resembles more what might be considered a meteorological front, a Russian seeing my annoyance observed: "Russia is many countries. It takes time," as if this explained everything.

On the streets of Moscow in late August 1998, contradictory realities collide. The country seems poised in a state of anarchy that is yet not quite chaos. It is a psychological, political, social, and military entropy of a kind I associate with a Jackson Pollock painting: a centerless, disordered mass of forces, held together only by the surrounding frame. As yet, the frame has held.

The question everywhere posed and nowhere answered is "What will tomorrow be?" This state of affairs has been going on for a long time, but only now, because of the acute financial crisis, has it come full square before the eyes of the West. I have heard many hopeful and many pessimistic surmises about Russia's situation. None were more realistic and sober than those of my Virgil through the labyrinth of the formerly secret Soviet archives, Vladimir Pavlovich Naumov, a historian and leading researcher for the Presidential Commission on the rehabilitation of all those wrongfully arrested, shot, tortured, or otherwise condemned during Stalin's rule.

Professor Naumov has guided my efforts over the past several years on behalf of Yale University Press's "Annals of Communism" series, which has published previously secret documents from the Soviet archives in volumes intended to illuminate the dark recesses of Russia's Communist past. He has taken me from the archive of the Central Committee to that of the KGB, where I have sat in what I was told was the office of Nikolai Yezhov—the KGB chief who presided over the worst of Stalin's Great Terror—discussing with his latter-day representatives the possibility of publishing books on the repression of writers and artists in the 1920s and 1930s and Stalin's use of the Soviet judicial system as an instrument of his political will.

A deceptively frail, elderly man, reared in the Party nomenklatura and tempered by his share of disasters, deceptions, lies, and abuses of power, Naumov reiterated to me his mantra: "The country is tired," he said. For the time being, it is psychologically and morally incapable of another revolution. Furthermore, he stressed, "there is no alternative to the present situation. The Com-

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munists won't come back. The people are waiting."

When I asked Naumov whether the people would take collective action against the present circumstances, he told the following joke now flourishing in Moscow:

> Three Jews are walking down the street. One asks his friend, "Do you own a dacha?" His friend replies, "Of course." In turn, they ask the third who confesses that he's too poor to own a dacha. So they say, "Listen, we'll put our money together to buy you one." Similarly, three Georgians are walking together and the first asks the second: "Do you own a car?" His friend replies, "Of course, and a very fine one." They ask the third who replies that in fact he hasn't the money to buy one. They decide to put their money together to buy their friend a car. Two Russians are walking along and the first asks the second, "Have you ever been in prison, my friend?" "Of course," his companion replies. "And Piotr, has he ever been in prison?" the first asks. The second answers, "Why no, he hasn't. So let's find a way of putting him in."

This is the way Russians help each other. By the end of our first day together, Naumov confessed that he thought, "It's the end of the regime, the end of democratization in our country."

I went with Naumov to the offices of Alexander N. Yakovlev, the former ambassador to Canada and architect of perestroika during the Gorbachev years. Dr. Yakovlev is the President of the International Democracy Foundation whose mission is to publish collections of documents about the history of Communism and disseminate the truth of that history to future generations. He is the head of the commission that Naumov works on. I had met Dr. Yakovlev on previous visits, but he seemed particularly distracted and gloomy on this occasion. I asked whether he was pessimistic about the present state of affairs. "There's nothing to be happy about," he answered. When I asked whether the fact that the government couldn't collect taxes meant that the majority of the Russian people felt no loyalty to it, he bridled.

No, he insisted, it isn't a matter of loyalty. He said, "If my Foundation had a kopek, I wouldn't pay it to the government either. Why should I pay them 80 percent of the income of my Foundation? Why? For their corruption and incompetence? No," he stated emphatically, "I am a patriot. I believe in my country, but I wouldn't give them a ruble." I didn't pursue this line of reasoning, which, despite Yakovlev's protestation, demonstrates the degree to which the fundamental social contract of the Russian Federation is in jeopardy.

He has recently written a very moving account, *Krestosev* ("The sowing of crosses"), of the crimes of the Stalin era and beyond. He points out that the only way for Russia to get beyond its past is to acknowledge it, face it openly, and grieve for all the wreckage Communism wrought. He despairs of the fate of the Russian peasantry, mourns the loss of Orthodox religion, and points out that at the present day there are over 150 anti-Semitic, fascist newspapers, some with large circulations, poisoning the minds of the people.

I offered him a copy of our new publication, *Socialist Realist Painting*, and, in accepting it, he said tartly: "There is not now and never has been any socialist realist art. It is a contradiction in terms." He is a man searching for a way out of the intellectual, political, and spiritual collapse of his universe. In the end, he said quite simply, "What can you do when you have no money?"

I asked whether he might be interested in commissioning a textbook on Soviet history using the documents Yale University Press and the Democracy Foundation have published. He paused. Naumov broke in, "It's not possible." To write a textbook means to construct a narrative with a unifying conception. No one would dare to undertake such a daunting and dangerous task at the present time. To offer a unified interpretation of the history of the Soviet period

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means, first, that you wish to know the truth and, second, that you have the courage to tell it. Many people today think that enough documents have been published. The history of that time is still not even being taught in most Russian high schools and universities. No one dares. "It will take a generation," Naumov added, "if not more." Both men agreed that the attitude of the government toward their commission would be a key signal as to its future ideological direction. The question of openness is in the balance.

On August 24, the ruble was trading at 7000 to the dollar (or 7 since the government lopped off the last three zeros by fiat some months ago). When I'd been in Moscow last January it was trading at approximately 5000—a 40 percent decline in its purchasing value. Initially this decline directly affected only those Russians who had money in the banks. Most do not. But in the last two months the ruble has slid to over 12,000 to the dollar and the effects of this fall have spread throughout the economy raising the specter of hyperinflation, which will affect everyone. And yet, outside of the cities in regions where people simply have no money and haven't had for a long time, it is not the decline of the ruble but the failure of the potato crop that poses the gravest threat to their well-being.

My translator tells me that she has been trying to purchase a new apartment for the past five years and her situation has been very adversely affected. Her present apartment is valued at $35,000 and she has saved another $10,000 in rubles, which she has kept in a bank. The apartment she wishes to purchase costs $50,000. The devaluation of the ruble means that she will now have to earn not another 25,000,000 rubles but perhaps as much as 50,000,000 rubles to purchase the apartment. Her salary will not compensate for the decline, and, if the ruble sinks lower, so will she, so will the future of her six-year-old daughter, and so will the lives of her ailing and elderly parents with whom she lives. Nevertheless, her main worry is that the Reds will be coming back, as she puts it, and that the country will be shut down.

Dmitri Kozirev takes another view. This grandnephew of former Politburo member Dmitri Shepilov is a journalist specializing in the Far East. Moscow is more panicked than elsewhere, he told me, because here people buy more goods that are dollar-based. It's true that the country is drained of money and that the situation is unpredictable. Nevertheless, he said, the country is big, very big, and it is impossible for the same thing to happen everywhere—some sections with strong Communist allegiances may wish to secede. There may be civil war for a time. But the country will survive. "You must understand," he stated, "the Communists are not Communists, the liberals are not liberals, the nationalists are not nationalists. Anything can happen. No one is in control." Kozirev thinks that the whole model for reform was wrong from the start and that Russia will now turn to Asia and away from Europe. It may try to model itself on the reasonably successful China or even India. Things, he thought, would settle down in three to four months. When I asked if he thought hyperinflation was a danger, he said, "Not at all. It's the solution. The only way is to print money." Let the country hit rock bottom and then build from there.

But what is at the bottom? When I asked Professor Naumov once about getting to the bottom of the Kirov Assassination of 1934 in the KGB archive, he said assuredly we would get to the bottom of the plot to kill Sergei Kirov. "But," he added slyly, "you must realize, the KGB archive has many bottoms." The situation in Russia also has many bottoms.

Along Kutuzovsky Prospekt, which leads from the Square of Victory—commemorating the Soviet defeat of Hitler—to the center of Moscow, the people go about their daily business. There is no visible panic on the street, although here and there one can see long lines in front of currency exchanges, men and women with paper bags

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full of rubles desperately trying to change them into U.S. dollars before the ruble disappears from sight. I witnessed no obvious social unrest. Rather, one sees people suffused with the fatalism Naumov had expressed to me, while above their heads and at eye level is a picture world vastly in contrast to their own.

Throughout Moscow one sees billboards advertising a cellular telephone company that read in English simply: BE HAPPY. At practically every block, one sees an advertisement declaring: THE ANSWERING BLOW. It consists of a picture of a goldplated 1930s Socialist Realist man and woman, arms thrust forward in true revolutionary style. But whereas in the 1930s they would have been brandishing the red flag of revolution, now they hold up a package of *Zolotaya* cigarettes against the backdrop of the New York City skyline. This is the answering blow, struck against American domination of the tobacco market, the new revolution being sold the Muscovites racing to cash in their rubles.

Elsewhere one finds shop windows stocked with expensive, foreign products: *Sport Siti* ("Sport City") offering Reebok, Kettler, Speedo, Adidas, BH Fitness, and Bauer products all at 20 percent off. A Xerox Copy Document Center. "Clothes for the home and relaxation" presents a shop window filled with stylish black and white undergarments for men and women. In another shop with the name "Men's and Women's Clothing" one sees Dior, Wolf, Lejany, and Alessandra Traini brands. An eyeglass store displays Yves Saint Laurent, Valentino, Tiffany, Oliver, and Longines eyewear. Beside this storefront is a window declaring itself to be *Dizain Tsentr* ("Design Center"). Here one sees the picture of a clean, well lit, modish, all-white room. In the background is a heap of art books. On top is an album of Walter Albini. In the foreground is a white sofa with an attractive, blond-haired young woman seated, legs crossed, upon it. She wears black bobby socks and has short cut hair. She covers her face with her hand as if she'd just heard a great joke or terrific news about the novel she's just written. The white telephone receiver lies face down on the sofa; beside her on the other side is her portable typewriter; at her feet is an open telephone book. That last detail is the giveaway: There are no telephone books in Moscow. This shop window does not advertise a sofa or even a design, it advertises a dream. No Russian who passes by has sat on such a sofa, used such a telephone, written such a novel, or received such a call.

The dream is heightened by what follows, a window displaying the holy triptych of the New Russian kitchen, which, in the encoded visual language of the New Russia, possesses a quasi-religious meaning. The window display is divided into three adjacent panels depicting a shiny new dishwasher, a stainless steel sink, and a wood-paneled work space overhung with copper pots and pans.

Not only is there an extreme disjunction between the products offered for sale in these windows and the capacity of most of the passersby to purchase them, but also the store fronts themselves typify the deeper crisis of identity through which the country is still passing. These windows display not the name of a store or a company but only the products they contain. The store for glasses is called simply *Ochki* ("Glasses"), the store for clothing is called simply *Odyezhda* ("Clothing"). Similarly, the stores for fish are called not Swenson's Fish Mart, but rather simply Fish. The stores for shoes are called not Johnson's Shoes, but rather Shoes. One buys milk at a store called *Moloko* ("Milk") and bread at a store called *Khleb* ("Bread"). True, here and there one finds a *Sport Siti*, Baskin-Robbins, Pizza Hut, or McDonald's, but these are largely foreign enterprises while the Russian stores, carrying Russian goods, bear no family name, no descriptive title, no proprietor's grandiose or silly self-projection, no attempted image.

Despite seven years of "democratization" and "privatization," there is a nameless, alien

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quality to the street life still, an absence of personality, a withdrawn human presence that reflects more clearly than any other outward sign the truth of what Naumov has repeated to me: the most difficult thing to understand about the present situation in Russia is what he calls the mentality of the people. Only this, he insists, will explain where the country will go.

Naumov is convinced that the mentality of the people is conditioned by their exhaustion, not their frustrations or expectations. It is shaped by a past, which, as much as they try to escape it, has taught them patience and providential self-protection. Despite the flood of foreign goods, democratic vistas urged on by advertising, and dreams of quick money, it is a psychology of scarcity, frugality, making do, and self-effacement.

That morning, I met with the head of one of the largest and most important of the State archives. It is also one of the most prosperous. After our business meeting, he sat down on the edge of his desk, clasped his large hands in his lap and smiled boyishly. "Jonathan," he said, "it can't get worse." And then a kind of black rage took hold of him: "Jonathan," his voice rose, "I need money. I have no money. What will I do? What? I have no money." He paused, stared at the floor. Then, as if to reassure himself, he said: "I'll survive somehow. We'll all survive somehow. We did before. There'll be a black market. Let them close the country. Let them make it thirty kopecks to the dollar. We did it before. We'll do it again."

Back on the street, I saw the billboard for the new Russian edition of *Vogue*. The caption reads: *V Rossii Nakonyets* ("In Russia at Last"). The photograph shows two models facing each other at a right angle so that their chests just meet (a loaded visual pun perhaps on a *tête à tête* meeting of the minds?). One is clearly American, blond, full face, smiling into the camera; the other, in profile, is a silky brunette with distinctive Slavic features. Red Square and St. Basil's Cathedral hover in the background. What is the message of their tight fitting shirts and open smiles except that the meeting of East and West takes place at a point of contact charged with money, fashion, and sex, forcing the stolid power of the Kremlin and the mystical power of St. Basil's into the background—*at last*? Nothing can stop the supercharged sexual imagery of the Nineties, not even the thirteen-foot thick walls of the Kremlin, not even the dreamy spires of St. Basil's. Put all of that behind you, the poster seems to say, and let's just enjoy ourselves.

Beneath an overhead billboard advertising elite apartments at $1900 per square meter, a bearded man with the watchful face of a Chekhov coachman sat on the curb waiting. A stray dog looked out of a doorway, unaware that the headline in the leading financial paper, *Kommersant*, was the simple word: *Obval* ("Collapse").

I marveled at the composure of the people I saw along Kutuzovsky Prospekt. Only a man and a woman feverishly counting out rubles from a large shopping bag before a currency exchange gave any outward sign of what the headline of *Kommersant* declared: *Obval*. I had heard the word on the lips of people in conversation, I had heard what the director of the state archive had said, but to see it an acknowledged fact in the leading financial paper gave the notion objective, public reality. But what did it mean? To speak of the collapse of the ruble is one thing, to speak of the collapse of the country is another. I turned into the doorway of my apartment building, located in the housing complex in which Brezhnev and Andropov once lived, musing on this question.

Since my last visit in January, the building's entryway had been repainted, the elevator, which had not worked in previous years, had been repaired, and a new front door had been installed (the coded entry system put in a year ago also still functioned). The owner of the small, three room apartment is an elderly widow who goes to live with her daughter when I come. She

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has a new front door with strong brass locks, but, aside from that detail, little in the apartment has changed. Not that it should have since January (I discovered two newspapers I had discarded on my last visit preserved in a heap on her table), yet my overpowering feeling is that little here has changed since the victory over Hitler in the Great Patriotic War. The tables, the chairs, the beds, the sink, the stove, the toilet, the twig broom in the corner, the mirrors, the bathtub, the plastic shower curtain reaching only halfway across the tub and hung on a single strand of wire all combine to drive this impression home.

As luck would have it, I arrived in Moscow at the time when the hot water had been turned off in my section of the city. I was told that the hot water gets turned off for certain periods in order that repairs can be made to the aged pipes. A likely enough excuse, I thought, for what was probably some kind of administrative incompetence. On other visits the water did run yellow for longer than I would have liked, but, in the heat of August, I would have put up with dirty pipes for a tub of steaming water. I was told the hot water would be restored on Wednesday, and I made a secret wager: if it was, I would know that Moscow was ruled by cause and effect; and if not, that Gogol, not Yuri Luzhkov, was the mayor. But perhaps, on reconsideration, I was wrong. Perhaps only in a Gogolian absurd world could the hot water have been turned back on when it was rumored it would. No one I spoke to could be sure.

But on Wednesday morning, still unable to sleep at 2 AM, and still without hot water, I decided to prepare a bath with whatever means at my disposal. Generally, I use the aged, gas stove only to boil water for tea or coffee. At two in the morning, I looked into all the kitchen cupboards for pots and discovered several old aluminum vessels which I filled. When I lit the stove, flames shot up six inches from the burners. The water never boiled, but it got hot enough in one of the smaller pots to carry to the tub. I poured it in. Five minutes later, I returned with another pot, only to find that the water I had poured in had drained away through a leak in the plastic plug. After an hour of boiling and carrying and stopping the leak, I immersed myself in about four inches of warm water. The next evening when I returned from my appointments, hot water ran from the spigot.

Every arrangement is frangible, held together, it often seems, by no more than the accumulation of dust and grease and long habit. At a touch, the careful arrangement of aged suction cup soap holder, dishtowel, and faucet falls apart. Touch the mirror in the bathroom and it swings wildly to the side. Turn on the flame of the 1940s stove and it soars to the ceiling. Try to wash yourself in downtown Moscow in 1998 without hot water.

The following day, I went to one of Mayor Luzhkov's grandest and most impressive accomplishments: the construction of a magnificent mall over the Moscow River. It was built by Austrians and has an exceptionally fine atrium filled with expensive foreign shops. We ate at *Vensky dvor* ("Viennese Court"). I had a perfectly prepared smoked salmon sandwich with cucumbers, horseradish, and baby tomatoes presented with a sprig of fresh parsley and accompanied by whole grain rolls served with Austrian butter. A healthy Jack Daniels *so ldom* ("with ice"), followed by a perfect cappuccino sweetened with Suiker from Holland.

All of this overlooking the Moscow River, with a clear view of the White House and, beyond, the Kremlin. Open, light, brand spanking new, with slow-running escalators and moving walkways, it has the motif of a ship sailing high over Moscow with portholes and deck chairs. It is a marvelous conception full of optimism for the future. But as Petrovich, an archivist and historian, pointed out to me, it is a ship that isn't going anywhere; there were more security guards, walking about with cellular phones and walkie talkies and MVD badges,

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than customers. Above the dining area was not only an up-to-date sprinkler system in case of fire, but also a closed circuit television camera in case, one can only conclude, a customer decided to pocket some of the silverware, or a few additional rolls. Old traditions die hard.

I asked Petrovich what he thought about religion and the rebirth of it in Russia. "We're all pagans," he stated, though he confessed some interest in the subject himself and said that a generation of "candle holders," as they are called, has come into existence over the past few years—people who go to church, hold the candles, and sing, but believe in little or nothing of the religion.

In his middle forties, Petrovich is the Kendo master of Moscow and as such has made several trips to Japan to study this martial art and compete. This is more of a religion to him than anything else. What is the philosophy of Kendo, I asked. It is, Petrovich explained, to release oneself from the particularity of your own ego, to see the sword coming down on you and to move and thus save yourself, rather than become preoccupied by your fear of the sword and what it may do to you if it strikes. Such inner preoccupation would lead to certain death. It is a philosophy of detachment. It does not justify anything. It allows you simply to see what is the case, free of your own desires, wishes, fears. What is the case is what is necessary and what is necessary is what is summed up in the word *normalno* ("normal" or "fine"), which Petrovich invokes time and again in our conversations in Moscow and e-mail communications. I ask Petrovich, how are things? The response invariably is "*vsyo normalno*": "everything's fine." What is *normalno*? I asked him once. It is, he answered, what is necessarily the case. Only now at lunch at *Vensky dvor* do I understand the import of this word.

Later, I returned to Professor Naumov's Moscow apartment to discuss various projects. It is a spacious apartment packed floor to ceiling with books and journals and file folders. Pictures of his children and grandchildren are on every wall, and on the floors are beautiful old Turkish rugs. Naumov has a small desk in the corner of his living room surrounded with papers and stacks of documents. Across from his desk is a relatively new Panasonic television with, I would judge, a sixteen-inch screen. My eye follows the electrical wire to where it plugs into a 1940s wall socket.

When we arrived, Naumov had been engaged in cutting xerox copies of a document out of oversized sheets of copy paper and, after our greeting, he sat down at his desk and resumed this task while discussing the current state of the country. After he finished cutting out each page, he took the leftover strips of paper, arranged them carefully into piles of equal length and width, bound them with oversized, Soviet-era paper clips, and then stored them away in his desk drawer, to be used, I imagined, for future note-taking or other purposes.

Our conversation lasted several hours. Again and again, he came back to the notion that the mentality of the country was something deeper than anything that could be witnessed on the street. The people would wait. The people would survive. They were not ready for further political upheavals. Everything would stay the same. There was no alternative. At least not yet.

Perhaps Professor Naumov is right, that the people lack the inner means of producing a new revolution. The clothes, the colors, and the mere material culture of tablecloths, kitchen chairs, dishpans, and typewriters suggest this. But in the end it is the people's faces themselves, the lined, aged, slightly sallow or ruddy complexions one sees on the street, the hands of farmworkers or stevedores, the hands that serve you in a restaurant or sign a government contract, the thick, treelike legs of the old women wrapped in support stockings. All this was appropriate to overthrowing the Tsar and building socialism and defeating the Nazis, but is it appropriate to advertising for "Global Choices," or "The New Russian Kitchen"? Is it appropriate for manipulating

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the stock market, experiencing *Vogue*'s meeting of the minds in Red Square, and finessing the social, ethical, and psychological indeterminacies of postmodernity?

The following day is Saturday, and Naumov has invited me for shashlik to his dacha thirty minutes outside of Moscow in an area where many former members of the elite nomenklatura now mix with the New Russians. This is an experience greatly to be prized. In fact, Naumov's wife, Valentina Ivanovna, is preparing two feasts. Before the shashlik in the evening, we will have a full Russian midday dinner.

The ruble is not being traded today and the city has a chance to catch its breath. (I will not be in Moscow when trading begins again on Monday and the ruble will sink further and the hyperinflation will begin to set in in the Moscow shops, and the fortitude of the people will be tested more severely.) Saturday is a beautiful day of respite, alternately rainy and bright. The black-green forests of tall birch trees and towering pines glimmered as we drove past roadside stalls displaying pyramids of enormous yellow melons and small, perfectly round, bright green watermelons. They are sold by dark-skinned southerners come seasonally to Moscow, probably for the past millennium, to offer their produce as evidence of the eternal fertility of the soil and the people who live upon it.

This will be a long day of pleasure, of eating, drinking, discussing politics, the Soviet past, our beloved documents, admiring the beauties that everywhere abound in the only half-tamed forest in which Naumov's modest dacha is set. His son Oleg, Assistant Director of the former Central Party Archive, has himself rebuilt the house, laid new floors, put up new pinewood paneling, reconstructed the upstairs study out of which Naumov can look into the forest and survey the work of some of his New Russian neighbors who are busily constructing new dachas of their own, using Swiss architects and materials imported in containers from all over the world. "New Russians," Naumov mutters dryly.

> A New Russian is driving his new Mercedes down the highway when he comes upon a friend, also a New Russian, stopped along the shoulder, the hood of his new Mercedes opened up. The first man stops and asks what's wrong. The second says, "This car is no good. Look at it. Now I've got to buy a new one." "What's the matter with it?" "It's out of gas."

Before eating, we hunted for mushrooms. My translator went into a dense group of spruce and came out with a handful of the prized brown fungi. Valentina Ivanovna stood on the porch of the house and said, "Here is something that absolutely cannot be found in America." This is a recurrent concern: to find something in Russia with which America cannot compete. She pointed under a tall spruce at a bright, lithium red mushroom; beside it, like a twin, was another that glowed orange like a harvest moon. Quite beautiful. Quite deadly. Here they're called "fly killers."

Valentina Ivanovna is a large woman with a great physical frame; for the past two years, she has suffered from a weakened heart and must take frequent naps. Yet she had worked alone all day in the kitchen. The table included chicken cutlets fried in an egg batter, brown bread, eggplant stuffed with soft cheese and various seasonings, braised potatoes, pear tomatoes, and cucumbers, along with some kind of pressed meat served with horseradish. Then she brought out her favorite dish: homemade pizza with sausage, mushrooms, onions, and red peppers.

We drank toast after toast, consuming first a bottle of Glenfiddich and then two-thirds of a bottle of Chivas Regal, which I had brought. Other bottles on the table remained: red and white juices, Georgian wine, and special vodka. These we would come to in due course. No one got drunk. Afterwards, Valentina Ivanovna rested while the rest of us stayed at the table discuss-

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ing the Doctors' Plot and other late Stalinist crimes.

Naumov and I went upstairs to his study overlooking the dense forest. "To understand history," he told me, "you have to overcome the documents. Documents by themselves will never be enough. In fact, very little was written down." The Katyn Forest massacre, he tells me, may be unique because it was here that Stalin miscalculated, thinking that since Poland had been wiped out and would never again be a state it was not dangerous to save the documents authorizing the murder of the nearly 20,000 Polish officers. In general, Stalin communicated his intentions in "half-words," hints, and casual remarks. For instance, after a Politburo meeting in which it was decided that a man should be arrested, Stalin as a rule would not sign a decree or arrest warrant, he would say only, "It's a pity. X was such a good man." The others would know what he meant and act accordingly. That is why the documents that do exist are so precious. As another example, Naumov said that although Khrushchev was on the Politburo for years, there are virtually no Stalin-era documents with his signature on them. Does this mean he did not take part in the decisions? No. It means that he destroyed most of the documents after he took power.

We are called down for shashlik. There is still plenty of light in the sky, but the air has gotten thin and chill. On the table is an enormous platter of this Russian delicacy which we eat until it and we are exhausted. More toasts. At the end, Valentina Ivanovna places the yellow melon I had brought in the center of the table. She leaves it there for several minutes so that all can admire its size and bright yellow color. She says, "Do you think it is good?" Then she takes it into her lap and with a large kitchen knife cuts it into wedges. Carefully removing the rind and disposing of the plentiful seeds in a separate dish, she distributes the melon which a selected person samples as we would wine. When it is found to be sweet, everyone is allowed to eat.

Naumov stands up and raises his glass and says that the most important outcome of our project is the trust and friendship it has yielded that is not simply professional. I second this and say that this trust and friendship are all the more precious in light of the world of lies, paranoia, suspicion, and deviltry we are studying in the documents, a world, moreover, that existed not so long ago.

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Franz Kafka & the trip to Spindelmühle

by Eric Ormsby

There is a photograph still extant of Franz Kafka arriving in Spindelmühle, the winter resort where on the same evening of January 27, 1922, he began writing *The Castle*. Like the country doctor of his own incomparable story or like the formidable Klamm in *The Castle* itself, Kafka made the trip rather laboriously by horse-drawn sleigh; in the photo he stands, pinched and shy, by the rear runners, his ordinary street shoes heaped with snow. A faint smile appears to play upon his lips, but it is difficult to tell for the print is blurred. It is evening; snow is falling. Drifting snowflakes speckle the flanks of the two black horses that pull his sleigh. Kafka arrived in this north Bohemian town near the source of the Elbe just as K. himself, the truculent surveyor of *The Castle*, arrived. "It was late evening when K. arrived," the novel begins in the new translation by Mark Harman, "the village lay under deep snow."[1] Like Kafka's own writings, the photograph has the mysterious force of those dimly recovered instants in which a fateful occurrence takes shape, though masked by the inconspicuous trappings of the quotidian. The photograph is itself elusive. It is reproduced in the second edition of Klaus Wagenbach's *Franz Kafka: Bilder aus seinem Leben* (Berlin, 1989) but was not available for the first edition of 1983; since it was this earlier edition that was translated into English the following year and published by Pantheon, the image remains somewhat difficult to come by. As with much in Prague, and in Bohemia generally, the recovery of the past, even of the factual visage of the past, is accompanied by documents, testimonials, and images that waver, inexplicably vanish, and just as inexplicably reappear. For, notwithstanding all the labors of those whom Czechs call *kafkologové* ("Kafkalogues")—a particularly obsessive tribe of researchers, about whom more later—much in Kafka's life and work remains, and may always remain, obscure.

When Kafka began drafting *The Castle* on the very day of his arrival in Spindelmühle, it was the first sustained writing he had attempted for over a year. From his diaries, we can see how even simple events, such as walking in the snow under the Riesengebirge, became charged for him with moral and spiritual significance. Just before coming to the resort, at the time of a drastic breakdown in his always precarious health, Kafka had spoken of making "an assault on the last earthly frontier," to which he appended the cautious gloss: "and indeed, an assault from beneath." Spindelmühle may have come to represent that final boundary, not only in a geographic but in a spiritual sense. Two days after arriving, he noted: "in this world the situation would be terrible, alone here in Sp[indelmühle], even worse, on a deserted road where one continually

1 *The Castle*, by Franz Kafka, translated by Mark Harman; Schocken, 352 pages, $25.

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slips in the dark on the snow, a meaningless road, moreover, without earthly goal. . . ." (I translate from the 1990 critical edition of the *Tagebücher* as the standard English translation is inaccurate.) This bifurcating significance, so to speak, between the "earthly" and the "unearthly"—or what Kafka, identifying with Moses, termed "the land of Canaan"—is reflected in the novel itself, which wavers between physical, even sordid, description and the evocation of some farther, sublimer realm.

Such ambivalence presents the translator of Kafka with one of his thorniest challenges. Edwin and Willa Muir, in their 1930 translation, opted decisively for the more spiritual emphasis, whereas Mark Harman favors a quite literal, and decidedly untranscendent, approach. I am not convinced that either approach, taken to the extreme, is adequate, or even correct. That Kafka had a distinct genius for making the simple complex, and the complex more so, is well documented (Czechs now call an absurdly complicated situation a "*kafkárna*" and the adjective "Kafkaesque" has, of course, taken hold in most modern vernaculars). In a sense, Kafka's complexity has survived him, for, beyond a certain safe point, entanglement in the world of Kafka and the world of the Kafkalogues—the two worlds are not always parallel—proffers a startling number of thickets for the unwary.

Though outwardly Kafka enjoyed himself at Spindelmühle (he particularly mentions tobogganing), the three-month stay seems to have held deeper and more portentous resonance for him. Upon arrival, as his diary records, he was startled to note that he had been registered in the hotel guest book under the name "Josef K." In the face of this mysterious, and indeed inexplicable, mistake, which amused Kafka more than it alarmed him, he made the rueful comment: "Should I enlighten them [the desk staff], or should I let myself be enlightened by them?"

The trip to Spindelmühle (or Špindlerův Mlýn, as it is now known in Czech) cannot have been easy for someone in Kafka's condition. It is not especially easy even today. As I found during a recent trip to the Czech Republic, this northern resort has fallen on hard times. Acid rain has devastated the forests which were once its glory; the guidebooks paint a portrait of a bleak plateau thistled with dead pines. Even to determine the train or bus schedules can prove tricky. And Czechs themselves turn abruptly dubious when one inquires about that trip to the north. At the travel office near Wenceslas Square in Prague, the red-cheeked girl on duty exclaimed, "Špindlerův Mlýn, Špindlerův Mlýn," in titillated disbelief when I asked for brochures, and she seemed amazed that any foreigner might want to travel there, especially out of season (in winter, snow masks the dead trees). In the face of such tiny but effective obstacles and the strange evasions of all from whom I sought information (if you want to provoke amused incredulity, ask any Czech how to go to Spindelmühle), I found myself identifying with K., the protagonist of *The Castle*, for whom ostensibly straightforward queries about everyday concerns quickly become labyrinthine in complexity. But then the peculiar difficulty of even arranging, let alone of making, such a journey began to impress me as appropriate to the whole arduous process of grappling with Kafka and his enigmatic texts, whether by interpretation or by translation (itself, unavoidably, a form of interpretation).

For the translator of *The Castle*, the deciding moment looms early, in the very first paragraph of the novel, with K.'s arrival in the unnamed village. In German, the last sentence of this opening paragraph reads: "Lange stand K. auf der Holzbrücke die von der Landstrasse zum Dorf führt und blickte in die scheinbare Leere empor" ("K. stood for a long time on the wooden bridge that leads from the highway to the village and looked up into the apparent emptiness"). The tell-tale phrase is "die scheinbare Leere." The Muirs translated this as "the illusory emptiness." Harman renders it as "the seeming emptiness." That qualifier "illusory"

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already tinges the sentence and the paragraph with vaguely metaphysical overtones, while "seeming" conveys nothing more than the sense that the emptiness is merely apparent. The point here is not that Harman is more accurate—he generally is—but that he, like the Muirs before him, had to decide at the outset whether he would follow an allegorical, a symbolic, or a literal reading. Though Max Brod rejected the allegorical interpretation, he argued forcefully for a "symbolic" reading, and this was espoused, even more vigorously, by the Muirs. Indeed, their mystico-theological slant influences their translation from the first page to the last, and it is this, beyond obvious inaccuracies of language, to which Harman and others have taken exception. Incidentally, while Harman is entitled, and even obliged, to draw attention to the Muirs' faults as translators, he has no right to patronize them, as he does in his rather shameless introduction, as merely "a gifted Scottish couple." Edwin Muir was a superb poet (championed by T. S. Eliot), as well as an autobiographer of genius, and Willa Muir an eloquent memoirist.

The Muirs worked from the edition of *Das Schloß* by Max Brod published in Berlin in 1926 by Kurt Wolff. In order to secure an audience for Kafka's work, Brod smoothed out and rationalized a text which Kafka had abandoned, after nine months of work, in a fragmentary state. The Muirs' translation of 1930 used this early, and quite imperfect, version of the novel. Brod and Heinz Politzer then brought out an improved edition of the German text with Schocken Verlag, Berlin, in 1935, hardly an auspicious time or place to launch a still obscure Jewish novelist. This edition, which reappeared as the "definitive" version in 1951, contained a number of missing chapters as well as fragments omitted from the 1926 edition. (It is this version, combining the Muirs' translation with new translations of the restored material by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, that forms the basis of Knopf's widely available Everyman edition). The significance of Harman's version lies principally in the fact that he has worked from the later "critical" edition prepared, after some twenty years of meticulous toil, by the Oxford Germanist Malcolm Pasley and his colleagues.

Kafka had come to Spindelmühle at the urging of his doctor, who accompanied him there, and the visit proved salutary. He wrote two short stories as well as the opening scenes of *The Castle*. This baffling novel, at once slapstick and byzantine, is ambiguous even in its title: in German, the word *Schloß* denotes "lock" as well as "castle" and, needless to say, the novel is a lock to which innumerable keys have been fitted. Harman's new version has been greeted with unusual acclaim immediately upon publication. Not mentioned in the notices I have seen, however, is the fact that Harman's is not the second but the third translation of *The Castle* and appears close on the heels of the 1997 Penguin U.K. "Twentieth-Century Classics" version by the English translator J. A. Underwood. No acknowledgement is made in the Penguin volume that it is the 1982 critical text (and not the "definitive" edition of 1951) that forms the basis for Underwood's translation. This, together with the fact that Underwood has produced an elegant translation—superior, in my opinion, to either the Muirs' or Harman's—seems to me to undercut much of the crowing self-praise in which both Harman and his publisher Schocken engage. (By contrast, Underwood's translation has been greeted with little more than the thunderous silence that often accompanies good writing not conducive to bombastic hype.) Harman makes no allusion to the Penguin version in his introduction, but could he have been totally unaware of his rival, given the almost claustrophic little world of Kafka studies? Curiously, there are at times surprising, almost exact, coincidences of phrasing between the Harman and Underwood versions. This may of course be accidental, yet, as I compared both translations, I occasionally found myself wondering whether

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some surreptitious consultation had not taken place between the two translators.

No detailed line-by-line, or even word-by-word, comparison is needed to demonstrate that Harman (and Underwood as well) is almost always more literally accurate than the Muirs. This is not only because Harman has had a superior text on which to draw, but because he is scrupulously faithful to the bare lexical denotations of Kafka's German. But literal accuracy isn't always felicity, and in the translation of a classic, such as *The Castle*, more is required than the plugging in of studiously correct equivalents. Again and again while reading Harman's translation, I found myself wondering how Kafka had become so stylistically unappealing (even, it must be said, so *boring*) in his hands; and again and again, in turning to Pasley's German edition, I found that while Harman was usually right in his meanings, he was often wrong, and sometimes completely off, in his ability to catch the correct tone or register of a phrase or sentence. At certain moments, this occurs because Harman injects American colloquial expressions into his translation; had Harman been consistent in this "Americanization" of *The Castle*, his translation might have been truly fresh and new. But it is disconcerting to find, in the midst of some lengthy and tortuous disquisition, redolent of the later Habsburg bureaucracy, such interjections as "come on!" (for the German *geh!*). Or again, incongruously, Harman will avail himself of a term with British rather than American overtones such as "cheeky" for the German *keck* (instead of, say, "impudent" or even "smart-alecky"). Now "cheeky" and "cheekiness" are perfectly correct as translations of *keck* and *Keckheit,* but in an American context they have an unavoidably arch overtone. To such overtones—and there are, alas, many—Harman remains deaf.

The Castle is a novel populated by voices. Accordingly, the various characters engage in soliloquies and disputations, perorations and harangues, that often clash head on but as often intertwine and harmonize with one another, as in a duet. So pronounced is this feature of the novel that one could almost envisage it as a kind of oratorio, perhaps in *Sprechgesang*. Even the final, unfinished chapter breaks off with the words *aber was sie sagte*, "but what she said . . . ," as though the hubbub of voices that animates Kafka's narrative might have gone on unchecked forever. The voices in Kafka's original speak, moreover, in widely variegated tones and accents. There is K.'s voice, increasingly strident, self-important, and litigious; there is the softer, more winning voice of Frieda, his onetime fiancée; the voice of the landlady, at once choppy and serpentine. There are the voices of the landlord, of K.'s wacky assistants, of the mayor, of Barnabas, Olga, and Amalia, of the child Hans, not to mention the "singing" voice of the telephone, and, even, in a letter, of the dread Klamm himself. All these voices, together with many others, are distinctive, if not inimitable. As Malcolm Pasley himself has pointed out (his comments are translated in an appendix to Harman's translation), the text of *The Castle* as Kafka left it was largely a kind of script for his own public readings; this accounts for his unpredictable punctuation, among other things. (Readers with German may get a sense of this remarkable "spoken" aspect of Kafka's prose by listening to the recordings made by the actor Gert Westphal of the complete *Trial* and of passages from *The Castle*. There is also an electrifying reading of "A Report for an Academy" by the great Klaus Kammer).

A translator should at least attempt to convey this pervasive aspect of Kafka's text. The Muirs, whatever their other failings, did so, and so does Underwood, but here, too, Harman falters. If his version were to be read aloud or performed, it would sound farcically stilted, if not garbled; this is decidedly *not* the effect when Kafka is read aloud in the original German. The problem lies, it must be said, not in Harman's grasp of German, but in his English. Too often while reading his translation I was reminded of an obsessive hobbyist painstak-

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ingly assembling some gingerbread castle out of prefabricated pieces: each piece has been correctly positioned in its specific slot, but the resulting structure is crabbed and unharmonious. To cite but one example (I cannot bear to quote more), it is hard to imagine any English speaker giving vent to the following, under any circumstances: "You're pursuing me, oh K., why are you pursuing me. I will never, never go back to you, the very thought of it makes me shudder. Do go to your girls; they're sitting in their chemises on the oven bench by your side, so I'm told, and when anybody comes for you they snarl at him." Whatever Harman may claim, such a passage (and a number of others like it) does not fairly represent Kafka's German or the German of his time. The Muirs render the same phrase as "they sit beside you before the fire in nothing but their shifts;" this is less literal than Harman but, I would argue, closer to the sense of the original. (Underwood doesn't do much better here than Harman.) Harman would probably argue (as indeed he does in his introduction) that he is merely faithfully reproducing Kafka's own German prose which, especially in the later chapters of the novel, often does read poorly. But, this clumsiness is characteristic of all of Harman's version, and not merely of the sketchier later portions. Indeed, it would be impossible for an uninitiated reader coming to Harman's translation to fathom Thomas Mann's praise of Kafka as a superb prose stylist or to appreciate why Hermann Hesse could term him the *geheimer König deutscher Prosa* ("the secret king of German prose").

Harman and his publisher boast that he has for the first time conveyed the speed of Kafka's prose; in the introduction, as in the Schocken press release, much use is made of the word "breathless." There is some truth to this, but the matter is more complex than Harman imagines. Kafka's prose in *The Castle* is often swift, but it is just as often slow and contorted and even ponderous. Harman attributes Kafka's narrative "speed" to a number of factors, including his sparing use of punctuation, a device to which he is undoubtedly right to draw attention; his own version may be drab, and deliberately so, as he claims, but it does move along at a swift clip, unlike the Muirs' more stately version. Nevertheless, in so "faithful" a translation as Harman's, the reader without German cannot always easily distinguish between what is original in Kafka's style and what is merely a convention of German literary prose. Thus, one of the factors that accounts for Kafka's narrative swiftness is, contrary to what Harman claims, a standard device of German literary prose: the linkage of brief, often staccato, declarative sentences, separated by commas, within a single overarching "compound" sentence. To an American ear, a clipped style gives the effect of celerity, for we register such sequences of abrupt or even choppy sentences as swift. Narrative speed is the classic device of the thriller, after all. But in German this is not necessarily the case, and many authors, particularly Kafka's beloved Kleist, avail themselves of comparable parataxis. Moreover, even if swiftness had been Kafka's principal object, we should still have to account for the effect of the complete sentence which these terse components form. While there may indeed be a sense of rapidity within a sentence of Kafka's as it hurtles and accumulates, the full stop which invariably closes it conveys quite another effect. Indeed, it is one of Kafka's most characteristic stratagems to corral a bevy of impetuous and jostling utterances within the confines of an encompassing, definitive sentence. (As it happens, Malcolm Pasley himself has dealt with this very matter magisterially in a chapter of his recent collection of essays, *Die Schrift ist unveränderlich* [Frankfurt, 1995].)

The growing tendency in Kafka studies and in translations of Kafka, which Harman well exemplifies, has been to assume that the closer we get to the actual text, the *Urtext*, as it were, the closer we shall come to understanding Kafka's meaning, whatever it may prove to be. There is some truth to

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this, of course. And the Kafkalogues from an early date have applied this reasoning not only to the texts themselves, but also to the facts of Kafka's life. I am not sure that such an approach, ever more obsessively pursued, can ultimately produce the understanding that is being sought. And yet, as Kafka himself might have said, what other way lies open to us? Perhaps all study of Kafka involves a kind of "trip to Spindelmühle" which not only his biographers, exegetes, and translators must make but also, indeed, all lovers of Kafka. An extreme illustration of this relentless tendency can be found in the monumental (and often monumentally silly) *Kafka-Handbuch* which the German scholar Hartmut Binder edited in two plump volumes in 1979. There, for example, amid much that is valuable and even indispensable with reference to Kafka and *The Castle* (and, in particular, its literary, political, and historical sources), we find several pages dedicated to the infant Kafka's "pre-Oedipal phase" and a full seven pages given over to his "anal phase" ("*die Anal-phase*")! I cannot say that I had ever before burst out laughing so frequently in reading a German scholarly tome as during my consultation of this prodigious yet weirdly maniacal handbook.

Of course, the ultimate Kafkaesque complexities involve his texts and the manuscripts thereof. Though since 1982 a definitive edition of Kafka has been in progress in the Kritische Ausgabe—lovingly and painstakingly prepared under Malcolm Pasley's direction (and beautifully produced by S. Fischer Verlag)—in 1995 Stroemfeld/Roter Stern Verlag, based in Frankfurt and Basel, announced that it would soon begin publishing yet another parallel "historical-critical edition" of Kafka's works. This is an edition with a vengeance, in more senses than one.

Roter Stern (the name means "red star" and suggests the political orientation of the press) became known some fifteen years ago for its controversial edition of the great German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, an edition intended to correct, challenge, and supplant the monumental Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe of that poet's works. The Stuttgart edition of Hölderlin is, like the Pasley Kafka, a patiently constructed and elaborately appointed edition of Hölderlin's works and, at first glance, it is hard to imagine how any further editorial intervention might be needed, or even possible. The edition gives Hölderlin the kind of marmoreal immortality his work seems to claim as its natural due. Alas, nothing is permanent, even in the transcendent realms of German scholarly editing, once a virtual guaranty of *aere perennis*!

Roter Stern nurtures the philologically subversive ambition of revealing classic texts not as some ultimate, and immutable, final product but as works in a continual state of emergence. That is, not merely the posthumous, unedited, previously unknown works of classical authors, but the very works of those authors accepted as "canonical" are grist for the Red Star mill. Though Hölderlin was the first, the press has not lagged behind, for completely new editions of such authors as Hebel, Keller, Kleist, and Trakl, among others, are appearing or have been announced. In a typical Roter Stern edition, it is not a reading text that is intended so much as a scrupulous facsimile reproduction of the author's original manuscripts with all the erasures, second thoughts, marginal jottings, overstrikings, squiggles, doodles, false starts, and aborted passages. (The closest parallel that comes to mind in the English-speaking world is the Cornell edition of Yeats.) When consulting a Roter Stern edition, one has the oddly conspiratorial sensation of looking over the writer's shoulder as he writes.

The maiden publication in Roter Stern's H.K.A.—or Historisch-kritische Ausgabe—of Kafka's works is a completely new facsimile edition of *The Trial*; the volume was announced for 1997 but is only now appearing (although a handsome and fascinating prospectus, which contains many facsimiles of the original manuscript and a rather prickly apologia for the edition as

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planned, has been available for some time). The Kafka heirs, however, who own the manuscripts deposited by Max Brod (with the notable exception of *The Trial*) in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, remain adamantly opposed to Roter Stern's project. As I write, the struggle has worsened to the point that the question of Roter Stern's right to proceed with a new edition of *The Castle* (or any of the other Bodleian materials) must now be decided by a court in Frankfurt. Whatever Roter Stern's motives may be, their endeavor does not seem to me to be quite as threatening as supposed. In the case of Hölderlin, for example, the Roter Stern edition is now regarded as an indispensable supplement to the Great Stuttgart Edition, and has actually afforded new insights into that poet, his working methods, and intentions that could not perhaps have been achieved in any other way than through an exposure of his actual holographs.

No translation of *The Castle,* given its tangled textual history, can ever be a straightforward venture; for the translator or editor, Kafka's very words must appear at times to evanesce in a welter of variants, like sleigh trails in snow. Behind each choice of words there may often lie vehemently contested alternatives. Of the three translations into English of *The Castle*, Harman's is certainly the most literal. In this it stands in a modern tradition of literal renderings, such as the Buber and Rosenzweig version of the Old Testament done in the 1920s, which seek to convey not merely the meaning, but also the very feel, of a text in a foreign tongue. Though his translation is hardly enjoyable to read (Harman would perhaps argue that this is what Kafka intended), it does give a sense of the harsh and jagged texture Kafka's prose on occasion displays. There is of course more than one tradition in the art of translation, and the Muirs, and now Underwood, follow another, older tendency, that of Florio's Montaigne, Smollett's Cervantes, Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát*. Such translators, while they strive for accuracy, are also concerned with the final formal shape of the work at hand; when successful they create equivalents which assume a kind of classic status that is at once desirable and dangerous—desirable because they help us understand the genius of an alien text, dangerous because they are often accepted unthinkingly as exact renditions, which they cannot be. For all their clunkiness, therefore, alternative versions such as Harman's will always be necessary.

In dealing with difficult masterpieces like *The Castle*, the quest for ever more accurate readings, for profounder interpretations, for scrupulous and yet artful translations, will continue to tantalize. The trip to Spindelmühle will always be long and there will remain many obstacles along the way. Even to book passage will seem uncertain. The buses will be packed with boisterous workers on holiday; the trains will idle interminably at forlorn switching stations. And if you do get there, the names will look alien, the old landmarks will have been replaced, the hotels will have new façades, and when you register they will mistake you for somebody else. The peaks all around will be unsightly, the paths muddy, the snow mere slush. And yet, to approach that forbidding and whimsical domain that constitutes the Castle and its precincts, it is a trip that will need to be attempted, and attempted often, even in the dead of winter.

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"Bones"
by Robley Wilson

1.

Some think we make too much
of bones.
You never see them
but after a bad accident
or a battle
or when the years have eaten
everything else men are.

2.

Dogs are an exception.
And armies.
Never too many bones
for them.

3.

I like to think sometimes
of burrowing inside bones
for their dry marrow—

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though the bones have to be broken,
and violence still offends
some few of us.

4.

I watched a farmer
put down in a tin plate
a ham for his cats.
I said: *Too salty.*

Driving home,
I thought again: *Marrow.*

5.

What bones wear—
now that's worth your time.
Little girls
with small bones like
a sparrow's skeleton;
tall girls
with graceful bones
like poplars;
big girls whose bones
are weapons.

6.

When we are old
I imagine your skeleton
antique ivory
and your muscles lace
to prettify only,
and your flesh and blood
something tiresome
contrived to hide the truth
like muslin over porcelain.

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7.

A list of white objects:

clean pebbles
paper
clay
alabaster
mad water
your smile
bones
bones
bones

bones

8.

Children, I will make
a playground of bones:
swings from the pelvises
of long-distance runners,
jungle-gyms as femoral
as giraffes in a dream,
slides scapular and swift
as bowing before the wind,
and drinking fountains
from opened skulls
the souvenirs of war.

9.

If we did not have our bones
we could shape ourselves
however we desired,
and there would be no poetry.

10.

In nightmares of the Last Judgment
the bones of several million years

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slide recklessly across our sleep
like the scrape of coal in a chute.

11.

The bones of lesser animals
have their own integrity—
small and large, predator
and prey, field creature
or woods-kind or burrower.
Walking with your woman
on a July evening, finding
a small skeleton at your feet,
you hold her soft hand tighter.

Animals neither know nor care
what keeps body and soul
together, nor how many bones
their wholeness contains,
nor what death does to them,
nor what they leave behind.

Ask foxes and hedgehogs and
the rabbits still as stone
in the corners of meadows:
they will say how they meet
the bones of their fellows
and pass by as free as ever.

12.

You and I are only
an attractive tapestry
our bones flaunt.

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Theater

Swans and swains

by Mark Steyn

A few years ago, back in London, Arthur Smith—a stand-up comic and sometime colleague of mine—hit upon the idea of writing a play set during the England/Germany match in the 1990 World Cup, one of those rare occasions when London's streets fall eerily silent because everyone's indoors glued to the telly. The play was called *An Evening with Gary Lineker*, after the celebrated English footballer, who doesn't actually appear in the work except, unseen by the audience, on the television set round which the principals are eagerly clustered. The evening was a huge hit in the West End and, in appropriately localized versions, in most other countries where soccer means anything. But the sterner critics were nonetheless aggrieved: this was *such* a good idea they seemed resentful my pal Arthur had got to it first. If only David Hare/Caryl Churchill/Howard Brenton/Alan Ayckbourn/you name 'em had beaten Arthur to the punch, then the text might have used this crystallizing moment in the national cavalcade to explore notions of identity/explore notions of maleness/explore notions of class/insert favorite notion here. Instead, Arthur had had his original notion and more or less left it at that.

You can see their points: the incontinent old hog snuffles out the best truffle in the wood while the experts are still ambling out the gates. But it's useless to complain: better playwrights would have done more with it, but he got to it and they didn't. As the relevant sections of the federal code and the equivalent laws of most other countries remind us, there is no copyright on ideas—and with good reason. Ideas are not so much internal—the flash of a cartoon lightbulb—as external: the truffles are out there, barely submerged, and it's a question of who ferrets them out. Good ideas have, at least in hindsight, a kind of inevitability about them: if you hadn't got to it, some other fellow would've, a week or a decade later. But you did, and that's a good 40 percent of the battle.

That's why any observations on Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (at the Neil Simon Theatre) have to start with the obvious: Tchaikovsky is playing Broadway—for the first time since 1941, when the stars of *It Happens on Ice* skated to his Piano Concerto No. 1 decked out with pop lyrics and retitled "Tonight We Love." Bourne, by contrast, gives us an entire score and deploys it, on the whole, more faithfully than it's been treated for most of the last century. To do so on Broadway is unprecedented. Dance evenings of any kind have been few and far between on the Great White Way, and even those that have made it have usually succumbed to the reliable kamikaze instincts of their creators. In 1950, for example, Katherine Dunham came to town with a dance revue so determined not to defer to Broadway values that she refused to give the show a title. As you'd expect,

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Miss Dunham's exciting production of wossname did not hang around. Bourne's swans, on the other hand, have legs: the show ran for over six months in London.

As to whether it's theater, I take the view that, if it's in one, it is. If that's not enough, let me cite William Goldman embarking on his account, thirty years ago, of *The Season*. Emerging from a freakish evening with Judy Garland in sad vocal disrepair, he wondered whether the concert strictly speaking counted as theater. "Theater?" said a Broadway pro. "You bet your ass it's theater. It sure as hell ain't singing." Likewise, this *Swan Lake* sure as hell ain't ballet. The swans are not balletically graceful: they lunge aggressively—as, of course, real swans do. The only exception is a pose (in every sense of the word): the head swan's arabesque, when he crooks his arm over his head in obvious mimicry of Margot Fonteyn in that famous photograph that for most of us is the first thing that comes to mind when *Swan Lake* is mentioned. Evidently this is merely a droll, cross-cultural reference—the equivalent of the moment in *The Boys from Syracuse*, George Abbott's musicalization of *The Comedy of Errors*, when, having junked every line of the Bard's text, Abbott belatedly has a seeress hiss, "The venom clamors of a jealous woman poisons more deadly than a mad dog's tooth." "Shakespeare!" cries Dromio, leaping from the wings. In *Swan Lake*, no one leaps out and cries in recognition "Ballet!," but it's the same general idea.

Instead of ballet, Bourne has his eye on the main chance—a theatrical "event," the hot ticket, the show that defies category to become the season's talking point. The timely retelling has become a theatrical staple: from *Carmen* to *Carmen Jones*, from *Madam Butterfly* to *Miss Saigon*. But most of these supposedly radical updates are drearily parochial, especially in Manhattan: thus, the New York Theatre Workshop, having relocated Puccini's *La Bohème* to the East Village of Jonathan Larson's *Rent*, has now given us Anne Bogart's *Culture of Desire*, which uses Dante's *Inferno* to tell the story of Andy Warhol. It's not just that the reductio is so trivial but that it's so predictably trivial. Bourne is cannier than that. Having hit on the idea of staging a ballet for a theater audience, he's approached everything thereafter with cunning calculation. Indeed, *Swan Lake* is most rewardingly approached as a master class—not in choreography, but in how to manufacture a hit.

The casual assumption is that there's a fairly wide spectrum between experimental, nonprofit, fringe drama and money-spinning crowdpleasers. In fact, it's more like the average shower unit: no matter how leisurely the dial shows blue gradually yielding to red, in most instances the slightest nano-millimeter adjustment nudges it from freezing cold to scalding hot. That's the line Bourne's *Swan Lake* tiptoes: just a smidgeonette too far, and his red hot smash is in the deep freeze, playing a half-dozen performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He starts from the premise that the money in *Swan Lake* is the score—that, even at the end of our cacophonous century, a general audience retains an ear for tuneful classics. What bores it are the conventions of classical ballet—the endless sequence of ethnic dances that bring the story juddering to a halt, and so on.

Then again, maybe Begitchev and Geltser's libretto is part of the problem, too: the Prince is under the thumb of a domineering mother and besotted with his romantic ideal Odette—gal by night, swan by day—who also has a sort of diabolical double, Odile. So what's all that about? Keep the domineering mother—you can't go wrong with that. Keep the Royals, too, but make them closer to the only ones who are still box-office: after all, if you need a chilly, aloof Queen who orders her mopey son to stop messing around and get married, why look further than Buckingham Palace? Don't make it too explicit, because that gets tiresome and anyway audiences can get Di and Fergie jokes for free on the late-night talk shows, but keep it handy as a guide for updating the more

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obscure characters—presto! Rothbart the magician is now an oily courtier—and as a useful source of sight gags: how about a mechanical dog that looks like one of Queen Elizabeth's corgis? But junk all that Odette/Odile stuff: who can follow all that these days except balletomanes who've already seen it a zillion times?

Instead of white and black swans, what would be the real crisis facing a modern Prince? Ah, yes: sexuality. In humdrum reality, he has a shallow, unsuitable girlfriend. But in his dreams and his deepest longings dances his romantic ideal, a swan—male. Not too heavy on the homoerotic, but just enough to give it a fashionable frisson and add a little amorous competition to the plot as the Prince's mother finds herself aroused by the swan's riding crop. Besides, what's the only thing anyone knows about Tchaikovsky these days? That the guy was gay.

As for the corps of swans, make them all male—and naked, except for white feathered pants. Here's the unique selling point: if you want to see people walking around in lounge suits and talking to each other, there's any number of plays, but if you want to see muscular hunks in fluffy tights prancing about as swans, we're the only game in town. And, whatever else may be said of *Swan Lake*, it certainly gives you plenty of swans for your money.

At such moments, you glimpse the true model for this Broadway ballet. Ever since *Cats*, the world has been wondering: whither the animal musical? I once saw a script for *Ants*, set on a dungheap, and a show called *Dogs* got as far as out-of-town tryouts. But Bourne's swans are Lord Lloyd-Webber's true theatrical successors. It's not just that Bourne has both the good Lord's producer, Cameron Mackintosh, and his orchestrator, David Cullen—in fairness, Mackintosh has mostly left him alone, and Cullen has done a superb job compressing the score for smaller forces without losing any of the light and shade, the lyricism and the melancholy—as that Bourne's *Swan Lake* is attempting the same journey as *Cats*. Take some upmarket source material (T. S. Eliot, Tchaikovsky) alight on some downtown trend (the British dance scene, gay chic) and blend into a middlebrow hit.

The old joke about the ballet is that, hey, I had such lousy seats, I couldn't hear a word. But that was back in the days when words mattered. Today, in the world's major theatrical cities, the sustaining audience is mostly tourists: Ian McKellan has recently decamped from the glittering marquees of London to a modest playhouse in the provinces in part because he's tired of playing to foreigners for whom English is not a first language. Producers, far from sharing Sir Ian's view of the problem, are interested mainly in making their shows more tourist-friendly—i.e., non-word-based. If the *Cats* model is the future, then we should make the most of *Swan Lake*: instead of Lloyd-Webber, Tchaikovsky; instead of Eliot's twee cat poems, no words at all (a great improvement); and, unlike *Cats*, a coherent narrative.

Confronted with a gay royal *Cats*, who wouldn't be cynical? In fact, Bourne's storytelling is so good that at crucial moments you're following the drama as intensely as any dialogue scene. Credited as director and choreographer, he's not fundamentally interested in choreography except as a means to an end—a way of telling a story. One could argue that that's what Petipa and Ivanov were also doing in 1895. But it's a skill ballet has been increasingly disdainful of, and today confines mainly to stories you already know. The nadir for me was a Scottish Ballet version, a few years ago, of *Peter Pan*. The choreographer Graham Lustig, a Dutch National Ballet and Royal Ballet alumnus, didn't seem to realize that his job was to find a dance vocabulary through which to tell the story: instead, he offered a numbingly literal dumbshow of the play's events—Mr. Darling's difficulties tying his tie—that would have baffled anyone unfamiliar with Barrie's original. By the time Tinkerbell came downstage to mime the "You *do* believe in fairies?" line, it was clear we were watching

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not a ballet but a protracted round of charades.

But what's more surprising is how even Broadway has had relatively little success using dance to tell stories. Reading Laura Jacobs' appreciation of Jerome Robbins in September's *New Criterion*, I was reminded of how unusual *West Side Story* is. The Prologue, in which the Sharks and the Jets dance their mutual hostility, could easily have provoked sniggers: the gentlemen of the chorus nancying about pretending to be tough guys. But the audience accepted it instantly: Robbins proved you could tell a story about gang warfare through show dancing.

The director/choreographers who followed found it more difficult: Gower Champion's shows are about tap-dancing (*42nd Street*), and so are Tommy Tune's (*My One and Only*), and Michael Bennett's are about auditioning for a show about tap-dancing (*A Chorus Line*). For all that choreographers profess the merits of dance in illuminating character and propelling plot, in practice it almost always boils down to illuminating characters who like to dance and propelling plots about dancers. Bob Fosse did this with greater panache than most, but, after catching the Broadway-bound tribute *Fosse* in Toronto a few weeks ago, I understood why he stuck to book shows and rarely extended any number beyond three minutes. Laid end to end (and most of his numbers are about getting laid end to end), his greatest hits tread water, recycling the same old mannerisms—the finger-snaps, the hat brims, the clenched buttocks—to ever more limited effect. Even Robbins never managed to pull off another *West Side Story*. *Gypsy* and *Fiddler on the Roof* are both landmarks, but they're not really dance shows so much as solid book musicals with integrated movement style.

That's what makes Bourne's venture into theater so striking. His company is called Adventures In Motion Pictures—not motion pictures in the degraded sense of modern Hollywood but as the term was originally conceived: a nonverbal form of storytelling. Bourne's *Swan Lake* is not a ballet or a musical but a silent picture that happens to have an unusually great score. The director frames the story in the overture, showing the boy Prince (Andrew Walkinshaw) in bed with a beloved stuffed toy—a swan. In the window above, a vision of *the* Swan (Adam Cooper) appears. From that initial scene-setting, Bourne's command of his narrative rarely fails him (except for some confusion near the end). As with silent pictures, it seems clunky and lurid at first. But, as you adjust to an unfamiliar vocabulary, you begin to follow it with the concentration of any straight play.

Whether intentionally or not, Bourne's dances rarely command attention as dances, only as the next stage in the drama: the choreography is a ragbag of styles, at its wittiest when mimicking waltzes and tangoes and other social dances. And, although the staging can sometimes be crassly literal, played against that glorious score the mismatch sometimes works. When the grown-up Prince (Scott Ambler) goes to a nightclub, Bourne sets Tchaikovsky's polonaise to the sort of Sixties disco movements Fosse ransacked for *Sweet Charity*. It's tempting to dismiss such flashy staging as a travesty of the score, but I'm not so sure: in ways Tchaikovsky might have appreciated, it emphasizes the gulf between the idealized eroticism of the Prince's dreams and the tackier reality. *Swan Lake* is not gay in the way that *Angels in America* and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *Corpus Christi* (of which more next month) and just about every other contemporary American play is. The swans represent an undeniably physical but also elusive and imprecise desire. And whatever else may be said, in focusing on a Prince who cannot reconcile his sexual identity with his royal identity, Bourne's libretto is about something—which is more than can be said for the original.

Everything is about sex these days—the contemporary stage being less interested in holding up a mirror to nature than in acting

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like those x-ray specs they used to advertise in the back of 1950s comic books which were supposed to let adolescent boys see through ladies' outer garments to their lingerie. There are still, however, differences in the kind of sex on offer. In America, according to that exhaustive survey of 1994, the people getting the most sex are boring, heterosexual, married couples—not a statistic contemporary culture is impressed by. According to another survey, Americans spend more time gardening than having sex, but I can't recall the last play I saw about horticulture.

In American drama, sex is still transforming, liberating, adventurous, cool. In British drama, it's mostly awkward, unfelt, dissatisfying, dehumanizing. Mark Ravenhill, who recently gave us *Shopping and Fucking* (or, as *The New York Times* calls it, reluctant to embrace themselves the liberation they urge on their readers, *Shopping and . . .*), has now followed up with *Handbag* (at the Lyric Studio, Hammersmith), a work whose crude central scene consists of a woman wearing an animal mask being manually stimulated to (as Judge Starr would say) "completion" by an anonymous partner: it's a moment of joyless degradation. Ravenhill's play is really two-in-one: some musings on the carelessly misplaced infant of *The Importance of Being Earnest* set alongside the modish childrearing aspirations of a quartet of gays and lesbians. But whether repressed Victorians or abandoned New Britons, it makes little difference. On the London stage, sex is now as mechanical as the set of *Starlight Express*.

In that sense, the most wistful and affecting relationship on the West End stage is in *Love Upon the Throne*, a sad/funny account of the Prince and Princess of Wales as portrayed by the two middle-aged men who comprise the National Theatre of Brent. Unlike the Royals of *Swan Lake*, for whom sex is all, for this prince and princess it's peripheral—a view which, at least in the late Princess's case, would seem to be more accurate. Indeed, the play has a kind of running joke about a much-hyped sex scene between Diana and one of her lovers which in the end never materializes. In trying to convey their forlorn, clumsy attempts at married domesticity, Patrick Barlow and John Ramm remind us that not everything's about sex.

Still and all, to return to the beginning, what counts is a good idea, and this season making a play out of a ballet score is a better idea than *Fosse* or most of the other lame retreads lurking in the "Forthcoming . . ." section of *Theatrical Index*. When we've finished pointing out the flaws and contrivances in *Swan Lake*, what's left is still in Broadway terms a formal advance which more talented dramatists might wish to ponder. The disappointment is the choreography: Adam Cooper is a star turn who never quite gets to spread his wings and take off. New Yorkers have seen him before—when the Royal Ballet came here a few years ago with *Mayerling*. This was Kenneth MacMillan's rendering of the famous Hapsburg tragedy of 1889, when Crown Prince Rudolph and his mistress were found dead at his hunting lodge—either a double suicide or something murkier. Cooper played Rudolph, and Sir Kenneth, a choreographer infinitely more gifted than Matthew Bourne, gave him some dazzling solos but let the drama sink without a trace. Good storytelling is not to be despised.

Incidentally, during *Swan Lake* and *Love Upon the Throne*, my mind occasionally strayed to an earlier meditation on the vicissitudes of royal romance. The Hungarian composer Emmerich Kálmán turned *Mayerling* into an operetta called *Marinka*. But, in his version, instead of being found dead at their hunting lodge, Rudolph and his mistress emigrate to America and settle down on a farm in Pennsylvania.

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Art

A Northern Renaissance at the Metropolitan

by Karen Wilkin

In this era of blockbuster shows, the permanent collections of the Metropolitan frequently become what we walk past on the way out of the latest event, so it's good to be reminded of how remarkable those collections are. Happily, the Met periodically organizes scholarly exhibitions that spotlight the richness and depth of the museum's own holdings. The current in-house showcase, "From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," may be the most spectacular and thoughtful to date. For cognoscenti and novices alike, for lovers of Netherlandish painting, and even for the undecided, the show is an unalloyed delight, a celebration of the abilities of early northern artists and an education in the field's latest scholarship (including the most recent attributions).[1] If the exhibition were anywhere else, New York art lovers would be planning trips so as not to miss it.

It's a show that takes effort, full of contemplative, often devotional works made slowly with meticulous attention to nuance and detail, and meant to be studied over a long period of time. They are pictures that dwell equally on the particulars of observable reality and the intangibles of faith. (Whether any of this can be seen—literally or metaphorically—in a crowded gallery is another story.) There's none of the stabilizing geometry of Italian Renaissance painting in Flemish art of the same period, none of the measured harmony that implies an ideal Platonic order underlying the randomness of ordinary experience. Instead, we are presented with an empirical, curiosity-driven record of the world with all its irregularities, its myriad textures and colors, its infinite distances, and its nonstop eventfulness. Backgrounds unroll in endless layers of townscape, field, forest, and river, all teeming with activity. Something is always happening, somewhere.

Yet the result of this interrogation of life as we know it is somehow more than real, as if we were seeing the quotidian world through eyes with more than human ability. Colors are more jewel-like, more saturated than they appear in reality; patterns are crisper; leaves and strands of hair more distinct; tiny details are more evident. Everything, no matter how apparently insignificant, is revealed with the same preternatural intensity and clarity, freezing the variety and action of daily life into magical stillness.

The tangible surface of paint disappears into seamless enamelled glazes that mimic fabric and fur. The artist's hand itself seems

1 "From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" opened on September 22, 1998 and will remain on view until January 3, 1999. A catalogue of the exhibit, by Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum and is distributed by Harry N. Abrams (464 pages, $75; $45 paper).

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to disappear and we are left with a powerful metaphor for the omniscient, all-penetrating gaze of a deity. (It has been suggested that these works were made with the aid of magnifying lenses and were meant to be seen through lenses.) Yet, at the same time, with northern empirical observation taking the place of Italian mathematical linear perspective, these paintings remain firmly grounded in the realm of human endeavor. No wonder these painters were among the most admired and sought after of their day.

A great deal has been written about the concealed symbolism of the apparently naturalistic details of early Netherlandish paintings. Nothing is what it seems. A lily in a vase, especially in an Annunciation or an Adoration of the Magi, is never merely a bit of still life, but an allusion to the virginity of Mary. So is a glass-paned window or a walled courtyard garden. A swooning Virgin whose pose echoes that of her dead son in a Deposition is not simply a compositional device, but a graphic emblem of (literally) compassion. And so on. When I was a student, we spent a lot of time on this sort of thing; I remember a medieval Latin jingle comparing the Immaculate Conception to light passing through a window pane—something about "Virgo post et ante." The point was to underline the difference between Italian and northern sensibilities. For a Florentine to paint a landscape full of shepherds and travelers was a manifestation of his delight in what he saw; for a painter from Bruges, it was an allusion to something otherworldly and spiritual.

These days, no one underestimates the palpable spirituality of these pictures, but scholars place equal emphasis on their worldliness. That Flemish painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries set their religious dramas in recognizably contemporary, realistic settings is ample proof that they took just as much pleasure in observing and depicting the world around them as their Italian counterparts did, whatever meaning they attached to what they rendered. The Flemings may not have been thinking about the latest poem by Poliziano, but they, too, as members in good standing of the Renaissance, were active participants in exploring the here and now—as well as in imagining the heavenly and the hellish. (In general, our notion of the whole fascinating, intricate relationship between the arts of Northern Europe and Italy in the Renaissance has been usefully revised in recent years—but more of that later.)

"From Van Eyck to Bruegel" is a large show that keeps stopping you in your tracks, for all kinds of reasons. That the Met has extraordinary Netherlandish art is not news, but only a portion of it is regularly on view, divided among the Cloisters, the Lehman wing, and various other galleries. Seeing these dispersed works together is not only exciting, but also revelatory. One of the Met's most renowned pictures is the Merode Triptych (c. 1425–30) by the still enigmatic "Maître de Flémalle," Robert Campin. Among the most innovative works of the period, the Triptych is a "rationalized" Annunciation, a mystical, supercharged event presented as though it were an ordinary happening in a thoroughly domestic Flemish interior: the angel seems to be waiting until Mary finishes the page she is reading, Joseph makes a mousetrap in his carpenter's shop on the right wing, and donors peer through the front door from a garden on the left wing. Scrupulous study has unravelled the complicated history of the Triptych's making, and has led recent opinion to assign the left panel to Campin's assistant, the stellar Rogier van der Weyden. Normally, the Merode Triptych hangs at the Cloisters, surrounded not by other paintings of the period but by furniture and a chandelier from fifteenth-century Flanders. In the current show at the Met, by contrast, it's in close proximity to pictures by Rogier and *his* assistants, which permits exciting comparisions to be made.

The initial impact of the show is bound up with this kind of eye-testing, absorbing confrontation. The gallery of fifteenth-century portraits, for example, gathers such

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familiar, deservedly celebrated works as Rogier's long-nosed Francesco d'Este, elegantly gripping an emblematic hammer, and Dieric Bouts's stern man at prayer in a jaunty red hat. There is Petrus Christus's shifty-eyed Carthusian, with his carefully parted beard, and Hugo van der Goes's exquisite young man, with his modish stubble. The stars are Hans Memling's glorious portraits of Tommaso Portinari and his wife Maria Baroncelli, owner of one of the most beautiful (and frequently painted) necklaces in the history of art. The portraits are newly reframed to reveal the artist's conceit of presenting the Portinaris as though seen against window embrasures.

This stunning group is made more so by the presence of equally splendid works from the Lehman Collection, usually isolated from their confrères: Christus's goldsmith in his shop with clients, Memling's introspective young man by a window, and Jean Hey's enchanting portrait of an elaborately dressed, bejewelled, ten-year-old Margaret of Austria, her Hapsburg lip turned into a childish pout. And apart from the pleasure of seeing these well-known pictures together in a new and informative context, there is an unexpected bonus: the addition of a wholly unfamiliar, rather stiff but sensitive painting of an elderly man at prayer, striking for its delicate rendering of white stubble and soft, sagging jowls, tendrils of sparse curly hair, and the fur lining of a winter garment. Now ascribed to Campin's workshop during the years when van der Weyden was an influential assistant there, the little portrait, perhaps the donor panel of a devotional diptych, has only recently been cleaned and removed from storage to join its relations—including that donor panel of the Merode Triptych.

This is the most exhilarating aspect of "From Van Eyck to Bruegel," not the number of terrific, important works on view that you know from years and years of frequenting the museum, but the number of almost equally terrific ones that you've never seen before and the complex relationships that link the entire collection.

Admittedly, some major figures of the period are either absent or represented only by workshop pieces. Among the autograph works, the only van der Weyden in the Met's collection is the portrait of Francesco d'Este, the only van Eyck the densely packed, luminous little diptych of the Crucifixion and the Last Judgment, the only Bruegel the great golden landscape of haymaking. Still, the Met has the largest collection anywhere of individual pictures (as opposed to major altarpieces) by Gerard David, a fine selection made even more impressive by key additions: a pair of mysterious, virtually unprecedented forest scenes, for example, have been borrowed from The Hague's Mauritshuis to be reunited with the rest of the Met's Nativity Triptych (c. 1510–15) where they once served as the exterior panels.

Few works in the Met's Netherlandish collection are of the exalted level of the van Eyck diptych, the Bruegel landscape, or the best of the portraits, but the show intelligently frames even less distinguished pictures. A section on workshop practice makes vivid the working life of the artist in a period when he was still regarded as a skilled craftsman turning out a highly specialized product. Related images from different sources attest to the popularity (and gradual transformation) of certain conceptions—the Madonna nursing the Christ Child, for example—while model drawings, the precious raw material, handed down from father to son, of any successful workshop, provide evidence of how these images were transmitted.

An informative, well-illustrated catalogue, paralleling the organization of the show, provides entries on individual works and essays on such themes as "Workshop Practice in Early Netherlandish Painting," "Portraiture: A Meeting of the Sacred and Secular Worlds," and "Bruegel, the Land, and the Peasants." Other articles explore patronage, clientele, and markets for Netherlandish art during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as well as the history of its

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more recent reception in this country—which goes a long way toward explaining why the Met has what it does.

The most provocative essay examines connections between Netherlandish artists and Italy—not, as we might suppose, a recounting of how that northern invention, oil paint, quickly supplanted tempera as the medium of choice for ambitious painters, but a history of taste, a meticulous tracking of patronage and collecting that reminds us that, for much of the fifteenth century, Netherlandish, not Italian, art was the most sought after throughout Europe. The Franco-Burgundian culture of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Flanders was chic in elevated Italian circles of the period. (Quattrocento court composers were virtually all imported from Flanders, so it's not surprising to find a parallel interest in Netherlandish painting.) Italians in Flanders because of the wool trade patronized Netherlandish painters. Medici bankers in Bruges sent northern paintings back to Florence. Even connoisseurs who never left Italy collected Flemish art and, sometimes, Flemish artists. That paragon of humanist princes, the hawk-nosed Federigo da Montefeltro, patron of Piero della Francesca, invited Joos van Gent to his ducal court at Urbino because "he could not find in Italy painters in oil to suit his taste." Federigo's in-laws, the Sforzas, were similarly fond of Netherlandish art and so were the d'Estes and the Gonzagas.

That Flemish composers ruled Italian music in the early years of the Renaissance is easily proved: the distinctive notation of surviving compositions announces the origin of the author. Only diligent study of inventories and old records can uncover many of the Flemish paintings that found their way into Italian collections, since many have disappeared. (Some of the more inventive may have been burned on Savonarola's bonfires). But even lost works are known from descriptions whose detail and admiring tone bear witness to how highly these pictures were esteemed. Their importance is affirmed, too, by the echoes of Netherlandish style that resound through Italian painting of the quattrocento.

Startling as it may be to anyone brought up to believe that Italy was Europe's acknowledged leader in the innovations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the abundant evidence of Italian enthusiasm for Netherlandish art—including the documented presence of particular Flemish works in Italy—has led modern scholars to see the "Gothic" aspects of quattrocento painting not simply as a persistent survival of earlier aspirations, but as a positive response to northern paintings. The crabbed eccentricities of Ferrarese pictures, are seen as inspired by Flemish grotesquery. (It's worth remembering that the Ferrarese court was home to some of the most important Netherlandish composers of the day.) Similarly, Mantegna's crisp modelling and incisive drawing, even when he is meticulously depicting classical motifs, takes on new meaning in this context. So does the proliferation of anecdotal detail in Venetian painting before Giorgione and the *maniera moderna* (and after, in Carpaccio and Lorenzo Lotto), which starts to seem related to early Netherlandish pictorial norms. And so do the dreamy landscape backgrounds of Giovanni Bellini's pictures: fields and crags bathed in late afternoon light, punctuated with towns and castles, ploughmen and shepherds, livestock and birds. "Flemocentrism" even embraces Leonardo da Vinci. Nothing to do with effects bound up with the properties of oil paint, it's because of the fantastic rocky settings of his *Virgin with Saint Anne* and the *Mona Lisa*.

The catalogue is full of meat, to be consumed at leisure. "From Van Eyck to Bruegel" comes down just after New Year's Day 1999. "I wish they'd leave the installation just the way it is now," a colleague said at the press preview. If only.

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Mark Rothko at the Whitney

by Mario Naves

In the Spring 1998 issue of *Modern Painters*, the painter Trevor Winkfield described Abstract Expressionism "as a monolith" that has been "accorded a reverential deference which . . . seems a mite slavish, if not downright unhealthy." Winkfield was writing about the New York School's domination of the standard histories of American art, and the other (often eccentric) artists who all but disappear beneath its shadow. The myth of Abstract Expressionism—with its cadre of ambitious artists and their conquest over the School of Paris—is of Promethean proportions, and the authority Abstract Expressionism holds over the art world is by no means diminished today. Many artists rue it as the last time serious art was, indeed, serious; others see it as a cultural nemesis—a patriarchal and nationalistic bugaboo—in need of deconstruction. Abstract Expressionism, epic and immovable, is a historical and artistic moment to which we all invariably return.

Of course, one doesn't have to be a postmodernist to question how long the Ab Ex orthodoxy can hold. We are, it seems, never lacking for exhibitions dedicated to the New York School, and repeated contact with its paintings has been, for some of us anyway, sobering. There is good Ab Ex painting and (as Winkfield implies in his article) "individual members" of the New York School are significant artists. The passage of time, however, has revealed many of its members to be minor players whose art can't support the major claims made for it. Key figures like Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky deserve their reputations, even if they aren't as gargantuan as we may have once believed. Conversely, artists who have been dismissed as "second tier" Abstract Expressionists—painters like William Baziotes and Richard Pousette-Dart—gain in stature every time we see their work. In the end, the question of whether (to borrow Irving Sandler's catchphrase) "the triumph of American painting" was just that in artistic terms remains an open one.

This fall New Yorkers have an excellent opportunity to assess two of the foremost proponents of Abstract Expressionism. The retrospectives of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) at MOMA and Mark Rothko (1903–1970) at the Whitney form a veritable yin-and-yang of action painting. With Pollock we have the artist as volcanic force, weaving around the canvas splattering torrents of energy. With Rothko we have the artist as hesitant seer, tortuously exploring the parameters, both pictorial and spiritual, of disembodied color. Both men are—or, rather, were—notorious in their own ways. Although Pollock was well-known as a, shall we say, dysfunctional personality, his notoriety is based largely on the formal qualities of his art—his technique famously earning him the label "Jack the Dripper." In contrast, Rothko's artistic legacy has been clouded by the manner of his death and the legal wrangling over his estate. For some,

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Rothko's suicide remains a hook similar to that provided by Van Gogh's ear or Toulouse-Lautrec's height. This relegation of art to psychological document is unfair and a phenomenon Rothko would have reviled. This doesn't mean that seeing Rothko's art is impossible—just that one has to recognize the fog before being compelled to look through it.

The exhibition "Mark Rothko" is an event of magnitude, containing over one-hundred of Rothko's paintings spread out over two floors of the museum.[1] It traces the artist's career from his "realist" scenes of 1930s New York through his Surrealist phase and —with a side bar of the "multiform" paintings—culminates in his floating blocks of color. The show is deliberately paced and we are encouraged to partake in the artist's —and, by fiat, the New York School's— arduous journey to maturity. This isn't a dishonest tack, although it can feel manipulative: when Rothko hits his stride the color of the gallery walls changes from gray to white, right on cue. It does mean, however, plowing through formative paintings of questionable merit. We don't go to the early figurative work expecting great art, of course, we go to them for portents of things to come. In *Underground Fantasy (Subway)* (c. 1940), Rothko uses absurdly elongated figures to divide the pictorial field into squared-off areas of incident. Although these areas are segmented vertically, we nonetheless see a compositional undercurrent that will be made plain in the Ab Ex work. In this light, the initial gallery of "Mark Rothko" is fun.

The same can't be said of the work that follows. Rothko's surrealist-inspired paintings are wobbly meldings of automatism, primitivism, and elements derived from Miró, Tanguy, and Klee. In Rothko's hands, this resulted in what could be described as otherworldly still lifes. Linear configurations, alternately microscopic life forms or fantastic machinery, are situated upon broad bands of gray and brown. Rothko's attempts to tap into the primordial unconscious are earnest—too earnest, maybe—and flaccid. The compositions are clumpy and his biomorphs lack personality. Imagine a Rube Goldberg steeped not in engineering but in Jung, or Klee's twittering machine left out in the rain. The best painting, *Tentacles of Memory* (c. 1945–46), succeeds primarily because Rothko left it pretty much alone. Even so, its spidery forms fail to captivate. Rothko's surrealism is bereft of the magic it so desperately wants to embody.

What *is* astounding about the paintings is how drab they are. Given what we know about Rothko's oeuvre, the dreariness of his symbolism can seem like the work of a different artist altogether. Therefore, when we first come upon the "multiform" paintings of the late 1940s, the change—indeed, the improvement—in Rothko's color is startling. Not being a Rothko-phile, I can't say for sure whether the leap from *Vessels of Magic* (1946) to *No. 9 (Multiform)* (1948) is the artist's or the curator's. (At the Whitney, this transition has the feel of someone flicking a switch.) It is, nonetheless, a stunning development. Recent conjecture that Rothko's pronounced use of color was the result of contact with the work of Pierre Bonnard seems reasonable. His fields of color can, at times, suggest interior spaces and their soft, flickering light is not unrelated to the French master's painting. Certainly, Rothko's forsaking of surrealism freed him to concentrate on his gifts for color and (as Ellsworth Kelly notes in the catalogue) proportion and measure. The multiforms are, to be sure, transitional paintings, but we, nonetheless, applaud Rothko for the hurdle he has cleared.

1 "Mark Rothko" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York on September 17, 1998 and will remain on view until November 29. The exhibition was seen at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (May 3–August 16, 1998), and will travel to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (January 8–April 18, 1999). A catalogue of the exhibition, by Jeffrey Weiss, has been published by the National Gallery of Art and is distributed by Yale University Press (352 pages, $65).

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Rothko subsequently jettisoned the patchy irregularity of the multiform paintings for a simplified, symmetrical format. His canvases become occupied by horizontally oriented rectangles, stacked one on top of the other, and, at times, interrupted by a blurry stripe of color. The sine qua non of Rothko's maturity is just that: color, warm and full. Entering the gallery containing the first of his signature paintings is like being wrapped in a chromatic blanket. This metaphor is one Rothko would have understood. He once recommended that the ideal viewing distance from one of his paintings was eighteen inches, so that the viewer would be subsumed by the field of the painting itself. At Rothko's best, this is what happens. The paintings function like environments of color whose construction, taller than wide, echoes our own. Rarely do we feel that the canvases have been pumped up for effect. When Rothko was later forced to work in smaller formats for health reasons, we realize just how integral scale was to his vision. Without their encompassing size, Rothko's paintings are boxes rather than events.

Although one is aware of the artist's scumbling and scraping of pigment, Rothko's paint handling doesn't announce itself as such. In fact, it often threatens to disappear altogether. His images are emphatic without being physical. The myriad washes of paint give each block of color density and presence, establishing its own tentative hold in space. These expanses of color may fall back, come forward, jog against each other or announce themselves forcefully. This pictorial tension isn't unrelated to Hans Hofmann's push-and-pull, although Rothko's work is too taciturn for such a punchy conceit. Call it nudge-and-shift. In *Black over Reds* (1957), a black rectangle hovers over—"governs" may be a better word—two red rectangles on a reddish ground, creating a cavern-like light. The pulse of the painting is subdued but heated, a dialogue between colors that embraces mystery and eludes the academic. Rothko imbued color with a dramatic amplitude that is astounding given an art of such limited means.

Yet somewhere after the midpoint of the show we become aware that the objects on view aren't paintings so much as "Rothkos." The work becomes repetitive, if not, strictly speaking, formulaic. It's the evidence of an artist who had dug himself into a rut so deep that he was incapable of scrambling out of it. Some of the later paintings, particularly the black monochromes, are attempts at, well, *something*, but they are timorous and flat. By the time we reach the black and white paintings of the final gallery we are left not with profundity (as his admirers would have it), but stasis.

Leafing through the catalogue of the exhibition, I came across a 1969 acrylic on paper by Rothko and, placed directly opposite, an oil on canvas by Alberto Giacometti, dated 1958. Comparisons with established masters are meant to buoy an artist's work and are, more often than not, specious. Yet this one was telling, albeit inadvertently. Compared to the rigor of Giacometti's work, Rothko's oeuvre begins to look fussy and evasive. "The progression of a painter's work . . ." the artist stated, "will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles." I would be the last one to downgrade clarity, yet by essentializing his art to such a radical degree, Rothko ultimately found himself confronted with an artistic void. That he made something real of that void is undeniable; that he found himself constrained by it is, likewise, unarguable. The tragedy of Rothko's art, as opposed to his life, is that such a difficult journey should lead to such a frustrating denouement. Rothko's accomplishment will outlast that of many of his colleagues. Yet the deflated mood the viewer is left with after exiting "Mark Rothko" is the consequence of a legendary figure falling inexorably to earth.

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The media

Illusions of equivalence

by James Bowman

Any time a journalist or "media" person opens his mouth on a historical subject, you can be pretty sure that what comes out of it will be some version of the popular Whiggish consensus that is on display at the "Newseum" run by the Gannett Corporation near its *USA Today* headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.[1] But one does not have to go so far down the journalistic food chain as *USA Today* in order to find it. Margaret Talbot, for example, writing about the Clinton scandals in *The New Republic*, claimed that, thirty years ago,

> few Americans of either sex would have thought there was anything objectionable about a one-sided sexual relationship between an immensely powerful man and a swoony, self-deluding twenty-two-year-old subordinate. But fathers do commit themselves to more egalitarian arrangements now, and people do think there might be something not only tacky but also exploitative about such a relationship. And the reason they think these things is, in large part, that feminism has convinced them —not so much through legislation as through patient explanation and urgent argument and the example of people who chose to order their lives differently than their parents did.

Anyone who can write these words must be suffering from the twin afflictions of extreme youth and even more extreme ignorance. Margaret Talbot has obviously never learned any history but feminist history. Yet Richard Cohen, a mature man whose education presumably antedates the age of the tenured radicals, can write of Kenneth Starr in *The Washington Post* that "in a different era, he would have made a splendid petit fascist—moral certainty delivered by the fistful."

There writes a man who, you might think, would have some reason to know what the word "fascist" means (hint: it's not "moral certainty," of which Mr. Cohen seems to have his own plentiful supply). But the standard "progressive" view of contemporary history that has been adopted by the journalistic consensus apparently permits the use of "fascist" in the Stalinist sense, to apply to anyone or anything that does not agree with progressive opinion. That opinion is thus elevated to something like the historical inevitability to which Marxism first taught it to aspire. Which must be why something that ought to be obvious to the meanest intelligence—namely that the thought of Benito Mussolini is most unlikely to have been the inspiration for Mr. Starr or anyone else who takes seriously the laws of perjury—manages to elude the grasp of Richard Cohen.

The power of this consensus to form the historical consciousness of media folk ought to be borne in mind by those who watch Jeremy Isaacs's twenty-four-part history of

1 See "Pictures from the 'Newseum'" in *The New Criterion* (June 1997).

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the Cold War being broadcast on CNN between September 1998 and April 1999.[2] Michael Dobbs, for instance, writing in *The Washington Post*, is completely convinced of Isaacs's claim that "every single fact was checked and rechecked with a panel of independent historians"—so that he is confident in saying that "This is real history, altogether different from the half-baked historical investigation into the alleged use of poison gas by U.S. troops that blighted CNN's reputation several months ago." But you've got to wonder a bit about just what kind of luminaries must have graced that panel of independent historians, given that they passed as a checked and rechecked fact the completely unsubstantiated claim of Jack Valenti in the eleventh episode that Richard Nixon undermined the Paris Peace Talks by sending an emissary to President Thieu of South Vietnam during the election campaign of 1968, promising him a better deal if he waited until he, Nixon, was elected president.

Given that it took over four more years for a deal to be arrived at, and that even then the South Vietnamese refused to sign it, the probability that Thieu would have needed any such inducement to his intransigence seems remote at best. But those "independent historians" presumably knew as well as the promoters of the progressive consensus who are the good guys and who are the bad guys in Cold War history—and that ill deeds attributed to the bad guys are scarcely in need of checking. Likewise, Fidel Castro, who is every progressive's idea of a good guy, comes across as something close to the tragic hero of the "Cold War." Grimacing and rolling his eyes and his r's in romantic Cuban fashion, he is on the screen more often than anyone but Mikhail Gorbachev, the series's other big hero who, as an unemployed dictator, presumably had more time to give to Mr. Isaacs's cameras.

But it is Castro, of whose manifold and well-documented cruelties towards his own people we hear scarcely a word here, who is given the last word on behalf of the defeated of the Cold War. "Why believe that the ideals of socialism, which are so generous, and appeal so much to solidarity and fraternity, will one day disappear?" he asks his interviewer in the final moments of the final episode. "What would prevail? Selfishness? Individualism? Personal ambitions? That will not save the world. Of that I'm absolutely convinced." Opposite Castro, Mr. Isaacs places a hero of the other side, Vaclav Havel, who opines that "Communism as a system went against life, against man's fundamental needs, against the need for freedom, the need to be enterprising, to associate freely, against the will of the nation. . . . Something that goes against life may last a long time, but sooner or later it will collapse."

Thus the viewer is presented with the illusion of a fine neutrality as he is invited to choose between these two compelling views of what the Cold War is supposed to have been about—and was about in the same, very limited, sense that the conflict in Northern Ireland is about Protestantism *v.* Roman Catholicism. But of the strategic considerations that transcend mere ideological differences, the series has shockingly little to say, and that little is invariably treated as one of the incomprehensible aberrancies of bad-guy thinking. Occasionally someone like Henry Kissinger will appear on camera speaking of the importance of American "influence" in Latin America or Soviet "interests" in Eastern Europe. But his words are almost always juxtaposed with some atrocity—the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, say, or the American "destabilization" of Salvador Allende's government in Chile in 1973—and so are made to appear merely disingenuous and cynical.

Of course, if a Tsar of Holy Russia rather than the leader of a Russian Communist

2 "Cold War" is being presented on CNN in two volumes of twelve one-hour episodes. Volume I premiered September 27, 1998, and will continue each Sunday until December 13. Volume II of the series will be broadcast on Sundays from January 3, 1999 until April 4, 1999.

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state had found himself encamped on the Elbe with millions of men in 1945, it is hard to imagine that something very like the Cold War would not have happened anyway. But you would never suspect it from watching the "Cold War." The progressive historical consensus is inclined to regard the idea as "imperialist" thinking and relegate it along with "racism" and "sexism" and "fascism" and "moral certainty" to that shadowy bad-guy world which is perpetually just on the point of being thrust, along with slavery and torture, into the benighted past of which they are so characteristic. For this reason, what informing thought there is behind this documentary is devoted only to the Punch and Judy show of "capitalism" *v.* Communism with capitalism in the unaccustomed role of (more or less) deserving victor.

Given such a degree of intellectual confusion, it is surprising that the series is no worse. Indeed, its greatest weakness, which is the lack of any informing and sustaining vision to unite its twenty-four hours of television into a single, comprehensible documentary essay, is also a strength, since any such unity would obviously have had to be molded by the progressive consensus. As it is, the reader is able to balance appallingly foolish and mendacious episodes by Germaine Greer (on the Sixties) or Hugh O'Shaughnessy (on American intervention in Central America) with balanced and sensible efforts by Ian Buruma (on China) or Max Hastings (on spies). More episodes were written by Neal Ascherson than anyone else and, although he belongs firmly in the camp of the progressives ("It was in a clash of ideologies, Communist and capitalist, that the Cold War had its origins," he begins), he is for the most part fair-minded and reluctant to play the role of mere propagandist.

Such decentralization amounts to a kind of *perestroika* in itself, freeing us to enjoy the mostly excellent visuals, including some never before seen clips from recently opened Soviet archives—like that of the snowball fight from the late Fifties or early Sixties among members of the Soviet Politburo, including Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, that might have been dreamed up by the Monty Python crew. There are also less surreal moments to enjoy, like the tight little smile on the face of Robert "Bud" McFarlane, Ronald Reagan's National Security Adviser, when he told of Margaret Thatcher's reaction to being halted, in the full flood of a tirade against the Strategic Defense Initiative, by McFarlane's saying: "Prime Minister, President Reagan believes that there's at least $300 million a year that ought to be subcontracted to British companies that would support SDI." There followed, says McFarlane, "a long pause" after which she said: "There may be something to this after all." It must be one of the few examples on record of the Iron Lady's making a humorous remark.

In fact there is in the series quite a lot of humor, born of the Cold War's many ironies. Thus, amidst the general sense of gloom gathering over what was to become East Germany, a German Communist who had spent the years from 1935 to 1945 in Moscow says that, by comparison, the Soviet zone of Germany in the immediate postwar years was "wonderful. . . . [There was] much less terror." It was also worth a lot to me to see the aged Robert McNamara utter a lunatic cackle as he says: "It's *not* mad! Mutual Assured Destruction is the foundation of deterrence." Another great moment is when Khionia Kraskina, a Soviet rocket technician, tells us that, not being allowed for security reasons to use the word "missile," she and her girlfriends called the rocket that took Yuri Gagarin into space "our dear one." "At first our dear one started rocking, very slightly. Then, whoosh, off it went off up into the sky. It was incredibly beautiful, particularly to us who had given so much of ourselves to the project."

Naturally, there are a great many grim moments as well—not only the predictable shots of bloody corpses but a moral grimness of a particularly repellent aspect. No

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merely written summary can quite convey the loathsomeness of Aldrich Ames, miming an exaggeratedly casual and insouciant pose and saying: "I knew quite well when I gave the names of our agents in the Soviet Union that I was exposing them to the full machinery of counterespionage and the law and prosecution and capital punishment . . . . Obviously these folks I knew would have to answer for what they'd done. And certainly I felt a [pause]—I inured myself against a reaction to that." Then, as if not quite satisfied with that answer, he insisted that our agents on the other side "gave up names, gave up secrets. I did the same thing—for reasons that I considered sufficient to myself. I gave up the names of some of the same people who had earlier given up others. It's a nasty kind of a circle, with terrible human costs."

Now there's a guy whose commendable "human" sympathies are untroubled by any nasty, "fascist" moral certainties.

But Ames apparently knew enough to play on what was to become the theme of the series as a whole, which was moral equivalence between the two sides. There is not a lot of evidence of corporate synergy in the series—apart from a clip of a CNN News Report and a reference, with pictures, to the 1986 Goodwill Games, which accompanied the doubtful asseveration that they had something to do with the end of the Cold War five years later—but in the argument from moral equivalence, we see if we see anywhere the hand of Ted Turner, the man who gets first credit at the end of every episode for the series "concept." Turner himself, in an interview with Lisa De Moraes which appeared in *The Washington Post* when the first episode aired, made the following argument to excuse the Chinese massacre at Tiananmen Square:

> We [Americans] are often judgmental about people that are different from us . . . and we don't even understand what their problems are. . . . A lot of students got killed at Tiananmen Square, but I remember several students got killed at Kent State. And, remember, they have a lot more students than we do. We shot down our own students.

There speaks a man who deserves to be married to Jane Fonda—who, by the way, does not appear as we might have expected her to do in the episode devoted to protest against the Vietnamese War.

Whether or not Mr. Turner really fails to understand the difference between a few trigger-happy National Guardsmen and a deliberate policy of state terror it is not easy to say, but moral equivalence is the best the West can hope for through much of the series. "Throughout the [Korean] war," Taylor Downing's narration (as rendered in the mellifluous accents of Kenneth Branagh) informs us, "both sides committed horrible atrocities." Likewise, in the years leading up to the Vietnamese war, says William Shawcross,

> The North Vietnamese embarked on radical land reforms. Land owners and so-called rich peasants were persecuted, pilloried and imprisoned. The party's cruel policies helped aggravate a refugee crisis. By 1955, close to a million people, some encouraged by American agents, had fled south. In South Vietnam, the United States underwrote the regime of President Diem, an anti-Communist determined to resist Hanoi. Ruthless and autocratic, Diem was intolerant of any opposition.

Oh, those American agents! But by the time we get to Mr. O'Shaughnessy's accounts of atrocities in El Salvador, the writer neglects to mention any save those said to have been committed by the American-backed anti-communists.

Similarly, in an episode written by Lawrence Freedman, Fidel Castro is given the opportunity to describe the alleged triumphs of his "revolution" (in health care, education, and so on), but there is no spokesman for the millions who left Castro's supposedly healthy, well-educated workers' republic—bar one veteran of the Bay of Pigs—no indication of why they left

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and scarcely any record *that* they left. At times one is left to wonder what all the fuss was about. This, I take it, is part of a more general unwillingness to tell too much of the real story of why the Cold War was fought at all, since to do so would be to appear too much a partisan of one side over the other. This is what we have come to recognize in so many other contexts as the vulgar sophistication of the journalistic mind, which supposes that, in a confrontation between truth and falsehood, the fair-minded and reasonable thing to do is to stand up for half-truth.

Another factor at work in the falsification of the Cold War is television's love of "human interest." In this series, as in Ken Burns's "Civil War" series on PBS, the stories of ordinary people that win golden opinions from television critics and people in "the industry" are often allowed to get in the way of any serious discussion of the causes and purposes of the war. For example, Vladimir Yerofeyev, a former Soviet foreign ministry official, tells us about the occasion at a state dinner once when a waiter dribbled gravy, or some reddish-colored sauce, which looked like blood, on Stalin's sand-colored military tunic. The entire room took a collective gasp and stopped eating. Another waiter rushed forward with water to wash off the stain. Stalin waved him away and continued his conversation with his neighbor. There was a sigh of relief. End of story. So we learn that, under Stalin, people were scared. We have it firsthand from V. Yerofeyev, who was there. But we could also have done with a few more reminders of what the red stain reminded them of.

The human interest stuff serves another purpose as well. There is one point in the eighth episode where an American and a Russian who were both children during the 1950s are juxtaposed. Jean Asam from Philadelphia says that after a duck-and-cover drill in her school "we felt we were protecting ourselves from the bombs and any damage that would be done to us; we felt totally secure and protected. . . . I do remember thinking of places in our homes where these enemy people, these Russians, would never ever find us and we would again be, of course, very safe forever." Then Galina Mishina tells us that "In the 1950s it didn't even cross our minds that the Americans were frightened of a Soviet invasion. We thought they knew we only had peaceful aims, that all we wanted was to live in peace. We wanted to rebuild our country; we had our five year plans. Nowhere was it written that we wanted to invade anybody. We thought we had something to be frightened of because they were capitalists, and that was something terrible for us. We believed that they sucked the blood of the workers."

Yes, yes, we understand that these are childish illusions, but childish illusions are, after all, to be expected from children. The subtext of the documentary, however, is that the illusions are somehow of significance in explaining the peculiar fears that kept the Cold War going. These children, we are meant to think, were cruelly abused by their elders who filled their heads with such rubbish instead, presumably, of explaining to them balance-of-power or deterrence theory, or the economic principles that underlay "capitalism" and Communism. These women are like grown-up people who still harbor bitterness against their parents because of their childhood discovery that there is no Santa Claus—which is a way of hanging on to belief in Santa Claus. Thus, perhaps, Jean and Galina, but certainly a great many simpletons of their generation, continue to hang on to a similarly fanciful belief that the Cold War was a kind of mass hysteria, and that it and the millions of deaths that resulted from it could simply have been avoided by keeping foreign policy, like television, confined to the human interest level. This series will do regrettably little to disabuse them.

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Fiction chronicle

In the city

by Brooke Allen

John Updike sampled what Manhattan's literary life had to offer, then turned his back on it definitively and, seemingly, without regrets. In 1957, after a two-year stint on the staff of *The New Yorker*, he defected to Massachusetts, never to return. He has therefore kept relatively clear of what he only half-facetiously describes as "the narrow precincts of the Manhattan intelligentsia, a site saturated in poisonous envy and reflexive intolerance and basic impotence." His absence from the scene certainly doesn't seem to have done his career, his health, or his spirits any harm.

But as imaginative territory, literary Manhattan has proved irresistible to Updike the satirist, and he has done it full justice and then some in his volumes of stories concerning the doings of New York novelist Henry Bech. In *Bech at Bay*, the newest and, apparently, the last volume in the series, the elderly Bech—seventy-six and accepting the Nobel Prize at the volume's close—is still very much a child of his time and his city.[1]

Updike has gone to pains to make Bech as different as possible from himself. Bech is Jewish; he is a native New Yorker, as opposed to the Pennsylvanian Updike; he was born, as near as I can figure, in 1923, almost a decade before his creator, and therefore took part in the Second World War. His creative output, too, is markedly different from Updike's. Plagued by a chronic and most un-Updikean writer's block, Bech has produced over the course of his career a mere seven slim, sinewy volumes, which include *Travel Light*, an experiment in the beatnik school, and *Brother Pig*, vaguely magical realist. "Kafka more *Schmerz*," as one of Bech's Czech fans succinctly puts it; "You more *Herz*."

A sort of Jewish postwar Everywriter, then, with recognizable traits of Bellow, Mailer, Heller, Malamud, both Roths (Henry and Philip), Bech is by now somewhat shellshocked by decades of literary infighting:

> These battles, even for their most enthusiastic veterans, took the form of a swift advance achieved in the dawn dimness of youthful ignorance, the planting of a bright brave flag in some momentary salient of the avant-garde's wavering front line, and then a sluggish retreat back through the mud of a clinging fame, sporadically lit by flares of academic exegesis.

In *Bech at Bay*, Bech and his contemporaries, if not actually doddering, are well advanced upon their own sluggish retreats. They spend rather less time than they used to in eating, drinking, and fornicating at international writers' conferences, largely because the Soviet Empire, sponsor of so many of these luxurious junkets, is dead. ("They gave us a good time, the Commies,"

1 *Bech at Bay*, by John Updike; Alfred A. Knopf, 272 pages, $23.

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mourns one elderly writer; "We're going to miss 'em.") They spend more time creating ingeniously bitchy contributions to their contemporaries' festschrifts, and attending depressing cocktail parties at Lutèce or the Century Club in honor of their ancient companions.

These literary veterans are not notable for their nobility or generosity of spirit. Typical of them is Izzy Thornbush, a grizzled survivor who remained doggedly hip for decades by spewing out now a thousand-page political satire in mock-Chaucerian English, now a massive *Nixoniad* written in rhymed couplets, and finally, when all else failed, marrying rich.

Bech and Izzy ape friendship while each expertly aims poisoned darts at the other's Achilles' heel: the veiled insults in their contributions to one another's festschrifts, for example, are as clever as only Updike can be. And at times Bech seems to be almost as self-involved as Izzy and his ilk.

> At bottom, he didn't like any of his contemporaries' work. It would have been unnatural to: they were all on the same sinking raft, competing for dwindling review space and demographic attention. Those that didn't appear, like John Irving and John Fowles, garrulously, Dickensianly reactionary in method seemed, like John Hawkes and John Barth, smugly, hermetically experimental. O'Hara, Hersey, Cheever, Updike—suburbanites all living safe while art's inner city disintegrated. And that was just the Johns.

Yet Bech, unlike Izzy, has retained a modicum of sincerity and a sort of innocence, and it is these that make him a proper foil for the venalities of his milieu, a rather jaded Candide. In the book's second story, for example, "Bech Presides," Izzy persuades a reluctant Bech to serve a stint as president of the "Forty," a feeble, genteel American imitation of the Académie Française. The average age of the Forty is about seventy-five; in fact there are thirty-three rather than forty members, because seven have died and no one can agree on new nominees.

Bech, like many others, has doubts not only about the organization's utility but even about its morality. Isn't it based, after all, on a false belief "that money and power could be easily transmuted into truth and beauty, and that a club of the favored could exist, ten brownstone steps up from the pitted, filthy, sorely trafficked street?" Yet he can't help feeling a wistful affection for its tarnished ideals and for "the distinguished dim visages over whom he now and then presided as if over a congress of the ghosts of the dignity, the integrity, the saintly devotion that had once attached to the arts in the American republic."

In accepting the role of president and taking it seriously, Bech proves himself to be a dupe and a patsy. It is a role he has perfected over the course of three volumes, and one that becomes him. In "Bech Noir," though, the fourth of the five stories that comprise *Bech at Bay*, Updike abruptly changes the rules of the game with a literary parody of *Batman* in which Bech, in cahoots with his lover, a young woman named Robin, gets his own back by ingeniously murdering the critics he hates the most, ending up with the dastardly "Mr. Orlando Cohen, the arch-fiend of American criticism," the Joker or Riddler of letters, who once cruelly savaged Bech in *The New Criterion*, of all places. This is a fantasy sequence, certainly: but whose fantasy, Bech's or Updike's? Because that question is never clear, the departure from realism is not quite effective, just as a similar fantasy sequence was not quite effective in Updike's recent *Toward the End of Time*.

As a writer Bech might be an anti-realist, but Updike is not; or rather, he is at his least effective when he tries to be anti-realistic. Over and over again, he has shown himself to be at his best—and at his best, he is inimitable—in transmuting the everyday event into the idiosyncratic vision; his gift is to lift the concrete up to and beyond the poetic. Who could match, for instance, this

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description of the composer Von Klappenemner, one of the ancient Forty?

> He had been, with his gleaming head and those curling Nordic lips spouting wicked drolleries from beneath his Saracen curve of a nose, a universal charmer; now the dimming solarium held, like a sound-swallowing baffle of nippled black foam rubber, the hush of his charm falling on deaf ears.

Or what about this glimpse of an intellectual gypsy at a party in Prague: "Her glazed skin was a seductive tint, a matte greenish-gray." No one but the erotically catholic Updike could get away with writing that line deadpan.

But to carp pedantically about Updike's stylistic experimentation is to take Bech more seriously than he should be taken. The point of these books is their gleeful mockery of the hypocrisies and careerism of American literary life, and of "the silken mechanism whereby America reduces her writers to imbecility and cozenage." Bech's experiences upon winning the Nobel Prize say it all. (In true Bechian fashion, the final choice was not intended by anyone: "It looked like a deadlock . . . between Gunter Grass and Bei Dao, with Kundera the dark horse," a friend tells him. "You were in the final selection because some were afraid a stronger American might actually win." He is needled by Charlie Rose, John Simon, and Terry Gross; the headline on the *Daily News* reads BECH? WHODAT?; he is attacked by talk radio hosts and callers. "Envy and resentment poured toward him out of the American vastness, from every state including Hawaii and Alaska, like a kind of lateral sleet rattling on the tin roof of his rickety privacy."

It is the charm of these books that Bech, in his bumbling way, somehow rises ever so slightly above the moral squalor around him. At the beginning of *Bech at Bay* he gives a speech at a pre-1989 official gathering in Prague, in which he delivers a guardedly optimistic message. Coming up to shake Bech's hand at the reception afterwards, a much-persecuted Czech dissident chastises the American: "You are naughty. There is no optimism." "Oh, but there is, there is!" Bech protests. "Underneath the pessimism."

Another veteran novelist who has proved capable, as with Updike and literary New York, of depicting a city exactly and yet making it recognizably her own, is Beryl Bainbridge, who over the course of a quarter-century has portrayed her native Liverpool with an irresistible combination of love and revulsion.

> They went down hill towards the river. Passing the old black houses built by the shipping owners, four-storeys high with pillars at the front door and steps of granite—occupied now by riff-raff: washing hung sodden on the wrought-iron balconies, a pram with three wheels in the gutter, a running herd of children without shoes. Some of the railings had been taken away to be melted down for the war-effort and there was wire meshing to stop people breaking their necks in the blackout. There was the new Cathedral rising like an ocean liner out of the sunken graveyard, tethered to its dry dock by giant cranes, coloured all over a soft and rusty pink.

This is the postwar Liverpool of Bainbridge's own youth, dirty and battered, its inhabitants scraping meager sustenance from what few resources the war has not eaten up. Every comfort is hard-won; the mere taking of a bath is an operation both complex and expensive, as described in *An Awfully Big Adventure* (1989).

> It meant paraffin had to be fetched from Cairo Joe's chandler's shop next door to the Greek Orthodox church, and then the stove lugged two flights up the stairs and the blanket nailed to the window with tacks. . . . Then there was the business of lighting the geyser, never easy on the best of days, let alone unscheduled. A loss of nerve, a miscalculation of timing between the release of the gas and the striking of the match could blow them all into eternity.

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> "Can't it wait until next week?" he implored, catching his breath on the first landing with the stove in his arms and the loofah, stiff as a smoked kipper, slotted for convenience through the braces of his trousers.

The loofah is a stroke not so much of imaginative genius as of a genius for observation, for the lovingly remembered detail. Bainbridge's novels are not exactly autobiographical, but they dwell on indelible moments of her own life: "I write about the sort of childhood I had, my parents, the landscape I grew up in: my writing is an attempt to record the past," she has said in an interview. She has succeeded not only with the visual elements of her world, but with the voices as well, and her lower-middle class Liverpudlians and Londoners, along with those who have bettered themselves and their diction, speak in accents that ring with truth and immediacy.

But Bainbridge has not confined herself to this sort of intimate realism; she also writes ambitious historical novels which have met with great success. *Watson's Apology* (1985) is based on a nineteenth-century murder case; *The Birthday Boys* (1991) on Scott's expedition to the Antarctic; *Every Man For Himself* (1996) on the sinking of the Titanic; *Young Adolf* (1978) on the proposition that Hitler might have lived for a time in Liverpool after the First World War; and, now, there is *Master Georgie*, the story of a group of closely connected Liverpool characters who travel to the battlefields of the Crimea.[2]

The historical novel is probably the most difficult literary genre, because by its very nature it imposes artificiality. The author is trying to recreate scenes that have since been transformed in countless ways, trying to capture an idiom that has been dead for many years. For a writer so marvelously rooted in the concrete as Bainbridge, how is the problem to be overcome?

We have no tape recordings of idiomatic English from the time of the Crimean War. (One of the first recordings we do have, in fact, is a late-nineteenth-century one of Lord Tennyson reading "The Charge of the Light Brigade," a rousing poem of high rhetorical artificiality, which could function as a subtext to *Master Georgie*.) The written language of the period, even the slangy but stylized dialogue of Dickens, can only be an untrustworthy guide to how people actually spoke. In giving voice to her Victorian characters, Bainbridge has opted for a rather formal, literary speech that lacks the vivid color possessed by her modern ones.

"I was twelve years old the first time Master Georgie ordered me to stand stock still and not blink": this is *Master Georgie*'s first narrator, Myrtle, beginning the story. Myrtle is an orphan who was found in the slums of Liverpool at the age of three, next to the body of a woman whose throat had been gnawed away by rats. It is a Dickensian image, and in fact the novel as a whole resonates with the Dickensian themes of the orphan's progress and of the explosive social mixing of different, and often antagonistic, classes.

Myrtle was casually taken in by the family of a prosperous Liverpool merchant. Her status within the Hardy family is shaky: she is not exactly a servant, but much less than a daughter. In truth no one seems to take much notice of her at all. "I was not loved and counted it a blessing; it meant my affections raged undiluted and I could lavish all on Master Georgie."

George Hardy, somewhere in his twenties at the opening of the narrative, is a doctor and amateur photographer, very much under the thumb of his extroverted, bullying father and his emotionally rapacious mother. Self-involved but friendly enough, he tolerates the devotion of young Myrtle and even uses it, allowing her to shadow him everywhere so that she can act as his assistant and messenger.

One day Georgie, followed by Myrtle, is accosted by a hideous prostitute who begs them for help; one of her clients has died in

2 *Master Georgie*, by Beryl Bainbridge; Carroll & Graf, 190 pages, $21.

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her bed. The corpse turns out to be old Mr. Hardy himself, and with the help of Myrtle and a street boy, Pompey Jones, Georgie manages to smuggle it into the Hardy house and prevent a scandal from breaking out. Their part in the affair, and the knowledge of this shameful secret, links both Myrtle and Pompey closely to Georgie.

As the years go on, the three develop a peculiar psychological and sexual bond. Georgie's impulses are predominantly homosexual, and he desires—possibly loves—Pompey, who is occasionally willing to humor him: "it's not a vice restricted to any one class," Pompey observes when he himself picks up the narrative from Myrtle, "though it's my experience that the better off bend to it from inclination and the poor more often out of necessity." Pompey himself is fascinated by Myrtle, but Myrtle's one *idée fixe*, in adulthood as in childhood, is Georgie, although her boundless capacity for unconditional love seems out of keeping with her character, which is both cynical and intelligent. She is well aware of the failings of her beloved: "Georgie's not one for talking, at least, not to me," she says. "Nor would I wish to be his equal, for then I might find him wanting." She is also self-conscious in her manner of loving. "All my life, I thought, I will stand at your side; and then I did blink, for the grandness of such a notion welled up tears in my eyes."

When the Crimean War breaks out, Georgie, deciding at last to do something useful with his life, joins the British forces as a field doctor, accompanied by Myrtle and by a Dr. Potter, Georgie's brother-in-law and the novel's third narrator. There they meet up again with Pompey Jones, and witness the horrors of a misconceived and misdirected war, horrors that were soon to be repeated on a larger scale in the American Civil War and World War I.

Master Georgie is beautifully written like all of Bainbridge's books, but it doesn't quite work. The problem is not only that it is essentially artificial, in the manner of most historical fiction, but also that one never really knows just what the point of it is. Is it about the tragedy of war? Partly, yes, but it seems more concerned with the individual characters and their prewar lives, so that the war seems extraneous, tacked on to the tail end of a very different story. Is it about love and its strange manifestations? Partly, again; but then why are the relationships not more fully fleshed out? What is the source of Myrtle's perverse and single-minded love for Georgie? When and how did it begin? Why does Pompey carry a photograph of Myrtle around with him for years?

Bainbridge has organized *Master Georgie* around a series of photographs taken by Georgie and Pompey, with each photograph capturing a significant moment or event in the characters' lives. This conceit seems not only to have provided a framework for the novel, but also to have furnished a metaphor for its aesthetic failing: the work as a whole returns to the reader only the bland, opaque surface of a photographic image, without depth or elucidation, and by the end of *Master Georgie* we know very little more about the people who have spoken to us than we did at the beginning.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo* translated by John Frederick Nims (University of Chicago, $25), and *A Culture of Its Own: Taking Latin America Seriously* by Mark Falcoff (Transaction, $32.95). Portions of both volumes first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Books

"Absolute nonsense"—Gogol's tales

by Gary Saul Morson

The word "weird" could have been invented for Russia's greatest comic writer, Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852, though one almost wants to write 1852–1809), who actually managed to be born on April 1 (March 20 by the Russian calendar). No one understood him, least of all himself. "What an intelligent, queer, and sick creature!" exclaimed Ivan Turgenev. When he died, one of his best friends, the writer Sergei Aksakov, wrote to his son Ivan: "I don't know whether anyone liked Gogol exclusively as a human being. I don't think so; it was, in fact, impossible. How can you love one whose body and spirit are recovering from self-inflicted torture?"

Even Gogol's name was fictitious, a sort of natural pseudonym. The family name was Yanovsky, but when Catherine the Great decreed that only hereditary gentry could own serfs, Gogol's Ukrainian grandfather invented a noble ancestor, Hohol (in Russian, Gogol) and changed his name to Gogol-Yanovsky, which was Gogol's name until he dropped the real part. His mother, who was eighteen when Gogol was born, came to believe that her son had invented just about everything, including the steamboat and the railroad. Sickly and hypochondriacal, skeptical and pursued by the devil, paranoid and ironical, he would escape from real or imagined criticism by fleeing abroad. Gogol's masterpiece *Dead Souls* is set in the Russian provinces, but was written entirely in Europe, mostly in his beloved Rome. The city fascinated him by its beauty, its history, and its smells. "Would you believe me," he wrote to a Russian friend, "that sometimes I am seized by a frenzied desire to transform myself into one big nose . . . whose nostrils would be as large as pails so that I can imbibe as much . . . as possible."

Everything is olfactory in Gogol, who had quite a schnoz himself. In "The Diary of a Madman," the insane hero decides that people's noses have all emigrated to the moon; in "Nevsky Avenue" we read of "mustaches to which the better part of a lifetime is devoted." In one strange sequence of that story, a vulgarian pursuing a pretty German girl winds up in a shop where he encounters her inebriated husband and another tradesman who happen to be named Schiller and Hoffman: "not the Schiller who wrote *William Tell* and the *History of the Thirty Years' War,* but the famous Schiller, the ironmonger and tinsmith of Meshchansky Street. Beside Schiller stood Hoffman—not the writer Hoffman, but a rather high-class bootmaker." Hoffman is holding Schiller by the nose and brandishing his cobbler's knife, while Schiller urges him to cut it off: "I use three pounds of snuff a month on my nose alone!" Alone?

In Gogol's most famous nasal tale, the totally absurd "The Nose," a man wakes up to discover that he has somehow lost his nose, pimple and all, and now has nothing

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but an empty space "as flat as a pancake" in its place. Hunting for his nose, he discovers that it has somehow grown to full size and become a government official who outranks him. He catches up with the nose in the Kazan Cathedral, where he finds the nose "piously praying" and genuflecting, and timidly asks his member if it "knows his place"; but the nose, who speaks the only sensible words in the story, tells the hero he can't understand what he is talking about. Attempts to impose an interpretive grid on the story—religious, political, and, inevitably, Freudian—seem to be parodied in advance by a story designed to resist all interpretation. "Absolute nonsense happens in the world," the narrator says, and it is plain that for Gogol all attempts to explain the world must fail because the world is fundamentally inexplicable. Gogol's world is on display in a new translation of his best-known stories from the husband and wife team of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.[1]

Not surprisingly, con games are one of Gogol's favorite themes. In *The Inspector-General,* certainly Russia's greatest comedy, the officials of a provincial town learn that a government inspector will soon be arriving—doubtless incognito—to expose their corruption. As it happens, an idiotic nonentity, Khlestakov, is staying at the local inn and the townspeople decide he must be the inspector general: after all he refuses to leave and yet won't pay his bill, so who else can he be? They offer him countless bribes, let him talk flirtatious nonsense with the women ("we'll flee to some happy dale beneath the shade of brooks"), and take him on tours of their implausibly gussied up facilities (the director of hospitals proclaims that "we cure them like flies!"). In a recent *New Yorker* article on Gogol, James Wood describes Khlestakov as "an opportunist [who] arrives in town posing as a government official," but this careless reading reduces Gogol's comedy to ordinary dimensions. Actually, it takes Khlestakov two acts to figure out what is going on. Any good comedy writer could create a con man, but Gogol's genius lies in having the officials con themselves. Khlestakov is not so much a fraud as a phony, a dolt who becomes the occasion for people to outsmart themselves. When Khlestakov, whose name became synonymous with "stupid lying braggart," at last catches on, he yields to such a stream of boastful lies that, as the narrator of *Dead Souls* remarks on a similar occasion, it "was such a blue streak of nonsense that it resembled nothing on either heaven or earth" and one could only shake one's head and spit.

When the supposed inspector at last gallops away, the postmaster, who opens all outgoing letters out of a sincere interest in human affairs, comes across Khlestakov's insulting description of all the officials. The mayor cannot believe that an experienced con man like himself has been taken in by such a puppy. He foresees the worst possible fate: "There will come a scribbler, some inkslinger, who will put you in a comedy . . . he won't spare your rank and calling and everyone will grin and clap!" He turns to the audience, and, shaking his fist, tell us: "What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves!"—the hidden truth of all really great comedy.

At this moment a policeman enters and announces that the inspector general from St. Petersburg has arrived and summoned the officials. The play closes with Russian literature's most famous stage direction: the whole group is to remain silent and frozen in carefully described, grotesque positions of shock. "For almost a minute and a half, the petrified group retains its position. Curtain." It must be the longest ninety seconds in world literature.

Gogol's greatest con story is undoubtedly his novel *Dead Souls*. It is probably the most insightful parable on bureaucratic logic ever written. Russian landowners were assessed taxes on the basis of how many adult male

1 *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; Pantheon, 464 pages, $30.

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serfs ("souls") they owned, and so between censuses were forced to pay taxes on serfs who had died, on their "dead souls." The novel's picaresque hero, Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, gets the idea of buying up these dead souls—executing purchase deeds just as one would for live peasants—and using them as collateral. After all, they are legal property, souls registered with the bureau of audits. Landowners will be glad to sell them for almost nothing, or even give them away, just to avoid the taxes.

With this plan, he goes from estate to estate, meeting a series of grotesque specimens of humanity that only Gogol could create, and haggles over the proper price of nothing. One landowner, Sobakevich, talks up the price of his nonexistent wares by exaggerating what his serfs used to be able to do, and when Chichikov protests that, after all, they are now of no use whatsoever, Sobakevich replies memorably and horribly: maybe so, but then, of what use are the living? "They are so many flies, not people." When Chichikov insists the dead souls must be worth nothing because they are nothing, Sobakevich answers shrewdly that they are worth something because someone, Chichikov himself, wants them. What is this, we ask, a comedy on the theory of market value, a grotesque play on the tendency of governments to confuse legal entities with real people, or a troubling existential meditation on the insubstantiality of everything apparently real?

When Chichikov returns to town to count the souls he has bought, we recognize that he is some paltry demon. But he is shocked to discover that he himself has been conned because Sobakevich has slipped into his list a dead *female* serf, a counterfeit counterfeit. The town officials, who imagine the purchase deeds they execute are for real people, are amazed at the number of serfs Chichikov has acquired, and ask the apparent millionaire if he has enough land to house them on. "Sufficient for the peasants I have bought," he replies.

At last the truth gets out, and everyone in the town, feather-brained women and corrupt men, begins to wonder what it all means, what that horrible phrase "dead souls" might really signify. Interpretation goes mad: Could Chichikov be a counterfeiter, who has paid for nothing with nothing? Is he a government inspector, using the code word "dead souls" to investigate several suspicious "accidental" deaths? Maybe he is Napoleon escaped from St. Helena in disguise? Could he be the Antichrist? Or maybe he is really intent on carrying off the governor's daughter and using the dead souls as a distraction—or a wedding present? If these processes of deduction seem implausible, the author comments, they are no more so than the arguments scholars use when they pile hypothesis on hypothesis. At last, Chichikov, who has been laid up in the local hotel, gets wind of the speculative frenzy and hightails it out of town.

Of course, the reference to scholars and mad interpretations once again successfully parodies in advance the criticism that was to be written about this book. In Gogol, humorless interpretation is always as insubstantial as dead souls. The world he described is pure and absolute nonsense, a counterfeit of which there is no original.

Stranger still, in the last years of his life, Gogol himself succumbed to a religious mania and offered ponderous and pious interpretations of his own work. As Nabokov wryly observed, Gogol indulged in "thoroughly planning his works *after* he had written them." Possessed by a characteristically Russian desire to be a moral teacher, he spent a decade trying to write what would have been parts two and three of *Dead Souls*—its *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*—in the hopeless task of converting Chichikov and preaching the Christian virtues of the status quo to Nicholas I's Russians. While working on the "rest" of *Dead Souls*, he published the amazingly smarmy *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends,* which reads eerily as if one of Gogol's idiot narrators had penned it. The radicals were outraged—they had assumed the author of *The Inspec-*

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tor-General was one of their own—and the conservatives lamented a great talent lost to sanctimonious claptrap.

Gogol's paranoia turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy and, in despair, disgust, and fear of the Evil One, he consigned most of his decade-long work on the continuation of his novel to an auto-da-fé. Apparently committing slow suicide, he refused all food and grew hopelessly ill. Against his will, doctors treated him by immersing him in a bath of broth and—I am not inventing this—hanging leeches from his nose. He died in agony, uttering the mystifying last words: "A ladder, quick, a ladder!" Was he trying to mount up to the moon, where noses roam healthy and free?

Believe it or not, Gogol went down in literary history as a realist—so the radical critic Belinsky hailed him—a critical fate that can only be called Gogolian. This absurd interpretation became canonical in the Soviet period. I thought it would pass along with the "Era of Stagnation" (another truly Gogolian phrase for Russia), but I recently discovered it again in Wood's article. "The Nose" is a realistic story, he tells us, because realism can include surrealism and because the nose's social climbing is "a dogged literalization of a fantastic social reality." But the term "realism," if it means anything and not everything, refers to works like *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina*. "The Nose" belongs with *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and *Through the Looking Glass,* with Lucian's "Dialogues of the Dead" and the fictions of Kafka. If those are realistic, what isn't? Is the term simply a grunt signifying approval?

But Gogol's most Gogolian punishment, something his paltry demons might have conjured up, has been his translators, who have almost always been pedantic and humorless. And what is the point of reading humorless comedy? Gogol's idiosyncratic play with language, his sense of the funniest possible word, the rhythms of his absurd syntax—the reasons Nabokov considered him Russia's greatest writer—are replaced by prose "as flat as a pancake." There are a few exceptions, notably Milton Ehre's rendition of the plays and, especially, the *Dead Souls* rendered by Bernard Guerney, which Nabokov lauded and which was recently made even better by Susanne Fusso. By contrast, the new version of the tales translated by Pevear and Volokhonsky is bedeviled by an almost perfect sense of the least apt choice. Anyone who knows Gogol will only be able to "gasp and spit" at their tin ear. This is all the stranger since Pevear claims in his introduction to be an admirer of Gogol's linguistic legerdemain. If you want to know what Gogol doesn't sound like, pick up this version and hold your nose.

Sound judgments

Loren Partridge, with contributions by Fabrizio Mancinelli & Gianluigi Colalucci Michelangelo—The Last Judgment: A Glorious Restoration. Harry N. Abrams, 207 pages, $65

Bernadine Barnes Michelangelo's "Last Judgment": The Renaissance Response. University of California Press, 171 pages, $45

reviewed by Creighton Gilbert

The section on *The Last Judgment* in Howard Hibbard's justly admired *Michelangelo* (1974) ends with the assertion that the work is the artist's "most awesome creation." The words are not Hibbard's own, but his quotation and endorsement of Sydney Freedberg's view taken from Freedberg's likewise justly admired history of Italian painting in the sixteenth century. Since Michelangelo is generally felt to be the most awesome of artists altogether, such praise for the *Judgment* seems unmatchable. This status for his famous fresco has a very long history. Produced by an elderly artist who was already the most famous one living, it belongs to the small category of works treated as masterpieces in advance. The work's reputation has also benefited from its

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theme and its unusual relation to its presumed audience. *The Last Judgment* (called not "Last" but "Universal" in Italian) takes us to be not simply viewers in the usual way, but also participants, since we are to be among the judged. Looking, we must think about our entire lives. The work shares this claim of universal inclusion with a few other epic works of art like the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. Any powers they have as art are extraordinarily enhanced by the willingness of the public, so long as it belongs to the same culture, to assume that they tell about its own fate.

It seems odd then that *The Last Judgment* has been little written about, much less fully appreciated by people who do appreciate, for example, the nearby Sistine ceiling. Hibbard gives the ceiling three times as much space in his book as *The Last Judgment*, which is usual. The publicity materials for Loren Partridge's *Michaelangelo—The Last Judgment: A Glorious Restoration* tell us that his is "the first one-volume monograph" on the painting. (This rather neatly omits a good one of 1944 in two volumes in Italian by Redig de Campos and Biagetti.) In all likelihood, the work is skipped over today partly because we generally do not think of the *Judgment* as including us; we see it, like *Paradise Lost*, as a great case made over obsolete issues. A more obvious problem has been its forbidding visual effect, rightly called by Hibbard "a bituminous, bluish darkness unrelieved by coloristic passages." With some stoicism and some attention to learned studies, one could enter its amazing world of four hundred various people, but it has been discouraging to most.

So one welcomes two books on the subject, even if both at first glance evoke alarming associations. Partridge's has been given the look of a coffee table book, with which it indeed shares its vast array of color details, but not the superficial text; it is, rather, the kind of text coffee table books tend to steal from. Bernadine Barnes's *Michelangelo's "Last Judgment": The Renaissance Response* is a worked-over dissertation, but, despite the threat of the subtitle, it is not caught up in trendy theory.

It would certainly be valuable to have a better idea of what the original audience felt and thought about the work, and Barnes bravely seeks to find these out despite the large difficulties, which she recognizes. In one chapter, she summarizes what was written about the work at the time, the natural thing to do. This has been rather fully done before, if not with English translations, and the claims to novelty in this respect in the jacket blurbs are really a bit inflated. The author does well to point out, as others have, that the early writers in question are primarily absorbed in their own concerns. These are chiefly of two kinds: the worldly ones praised it with quite conventional rhetoric, while the churchly ones attacked it for inadequate piety. These views do not, then, answer the author's query about audience response very well. Since no other firm sources exist, Barnes seeks within the painting for links to the likely concerns of the various groups that had or may have had access to it. She rightly notes in an aside a thing not usually admitted, that our information about who had access is a little shaky. The reading here of the image as it might have been seen occupies the chapters before and after the one on the writings of the early critics. Even if this discussion—which is doubtfully described as "about response"—is somewhat hypothetical and open to argument, it does take a reasonable step toward exploring the range of attitudes of the age.

The obvious point of Partridge's book is the color of the newly cleaned fresco, no longer bituminous. The 150 details are splendid to have. The change is much greater than in the case of the ceiling, and vastly improves our ability to figure out how the figures are moving. The author rightly emphasizes (as has been done before, but with only a few examples) how the sainted people do not simply have or hold their attributes—as in older Last Judgments, which treat them as fixed labels of identity—but move with them. Catherine

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spins her wheel; Sebastian shoots his arrow; angels play about with the objects that connote Christ's suffering, using them as partners in dances, just as the devils do with their tools of torture. This book shows this best in photographs detailing one or a few figures at a time. When it comes to showing the whole work, the pictures do not solve the admittedly hard problems of getting the fresco all into one book-size reproduction or making a larger detail function as part of a unified whole. As for the text, we get a lot of the kind of art history that discovers lines pointed meaningfully. More attractive are the brief comments on the work by Fabrizio Mancinelli in the shorter section of this book, which officially is about the cleaning technique.

Although Michelangelo was even more inventive here than elsewhere with regard to his transformation of previous images of the subject, he was actively adhering to an old church tradition. Art historians of the work have always paid much attention to this, making lists of older Judgments that Michelangelo did or did not follow. Both these books are unexpectedly weak in this standard area. Barnes rightly begins by mentioning that older Judgments showed the inside of heaven and hell to which the good and evil are assigned, and calls Michelangelo's omission of hell markedly different from earlier versions. Michelangelo gives no place to heaven either, in the sense of the place where the good go; it appears only as the place where Christ is judging, while the older images offered both in separate slots. Yet, the painter's omissions of heaven and hell were by no means unprecedented. Barnes presents a medieval sculptured Judgment which she says gives heaven and hell little emphasis—she might better have said none. She says the same of Fra Bartolommeo's Judgment, begun in 1499, not noting the repetition. Quite a few others between these, notably popular woodcuts, abbreviate the Judgment in this way. The dramatis personae are lined up in place: Christ, his assisting saints, and the dead who have emerged from their tombs.

A second traditional rendering shows angels and devils sorting the good and the evil, who approach the entrances of heaven and hell but do not yet go in. Michelangelo follows others in this option. So had Signorelli in his *Judgment* thirty years before, and the earliest biographer of both artists, Vasari, pointed out how much Michelangelo admired Signorelli's earlier work, especially its energetic nudes. Today, attention to their similarity mostly focuses on the episode at the entrance to hell, with Charon's boat and Minos assigning each soul to the appropriate part of hell. But other major choices by Michelangelo follow Signorelli, such as the self-portraits that are so striking in both. Some of the similarities are rare choices, from the way angels pull the good souls upward to heaven, to the angels carrying the tokens of Christ's suffering over Christ's head. About one of those tokens—the column to which Christ was bound—Partridge says he knows no earlier inclusion of it in a Judgment except on a small medal, but Signorelli had given it a dominant place. Both Signorelli and Dante had presented the episode of Charon and Minos, and today Michelangelo is always said to have taken it from Dante, whom he indeed loved. But the other episodes are not in Dante but only in Signorelli, so one must suppose that Michelangelo looked at Signorelli's version of Charon and Minos with interest as well.

Apart from the self-portrait, which Michelangelo placed on a martyr's detached skin, the most titillating detail for so many people now and earlier has been the adding of loincloths to many of the nudes after the artist's death. The debate during the cleaning, about removing them or not, has certainly added to that fascination. Of the forty-odd cases, it was decided to remove those added in later centuries but to leave the earliest, the removal of which might have left merely blank plaster spots or other undesired results. Here and there, Partridge usefully reports in his captions on particular cases of removal. But he and nearly all writ-

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ers are silent on the point that half the figures, some two hundred, were given loincloths by Michelangelo himself. Surely our notions about him and about the Counter Reformation response, which Barnes has sought to fine-tune, would be assisted by taking this into account.

On the side of truth

Susan Haack Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays. University of Chicago Press, 212 pages, $22.50

reviewed by Jenny Teichman

"Give me a student through his sophomore year and he will be a relativist for life"—thus runs the boast of certain Eng. Lit. professors and other wannabe philosophers. Unfortunately, the prediction is often fulfilled since undergraduate students are not in a good position to distinguish a philosopher manqué from the real thing. Moreover, people who have been to college tend to overestimate the intelligence and originality of the professors who first introduced them to "new" ways of thinking.

Moral relativism is now endemic in Western society, though presumably it had its beginnings in the academies. It boils down to the view that nothing is right but thinking makes it so, the view that, if you and I disagree about some moral issues, we are both right because my thinking makes my opinion right and your thinking makes yours right.

Moral relativism appeals to folk who feel baffled about how best to argue against obnoxious behavior and insulting opinions. Some feminists, for example, having experienced male condescension and ordinary male rudeness in job interviews and conferences and college venues supposedly devoted to a pure, calm, unprejudiced search for truth, have come to blame "masculine ways of thinking" for their unhappy experiences. They are right in the sense that masculine thinking has been known to start from selfish or prejudiced premises but wrong to conclude that male and female thinking are essentially different from one another. Even supposing that last proposition were true, it would not follow either that all modes of thinking are equally OK or that the feminine variety is superior to the masculine.

Moral relativism also appeals to baffled folk because of a mistaken idea that belief in the possibility of objective truth in ethics always goes with pig-headed dogmatism. That view can lead, in turn, to the conclusion that relativism necessarily generates noble ideals. Which is also a mistake because relativism cannot dictate ideals—it can combine with any or with none.

If objectivity is impossible in morality can it be possible in science, in logic, in philosophy, in history? This question tempts students onto a slippery slope which ends in global (total) relativism. Global relativism is not endemic in Western society but it is quite fashionable in Western universities where it soon leads to the conclusion that truth as such is an empty concept and so cannot be the goal of education and inquiry. However, if truth isn't the aim of teaching and research, then professors everywhere are taking money under false pretenses. They should give up their pleasant, lucrative jobs and leave the education of young people to political propagandists and advertising agents, in other words, to *professional* brain-washers.

Although relativism in its present form is currently very fashionable it does not go unchallenged, of course. Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, and John Searle, for example, have all questioned its premises and conclusions. But (as far as I am aware) the most wide-ranging examination of these fashionable dogmas is being carried out by Susan Haack, of the University of Miami. Haack has been publishing articles and reading conference papers about the varieties of relativism ever since 1992. Eleven of these papers make up the work under review.

Haack, who is the author of a highly

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praised book called *Evidence and Inquiry* (Blackwell, 1993), explains in the Preface to her *Manifesto* that she lacks the ostrich temperament and so "could scarcely ignore a great revolutionary chorus of voices announcing that disinterested inquiry is impossible, that all supposed 'knowledge' is an expression of power, that the concepts of evidence, objectivity, truth, are ideological humbug." Two pages later she adds: "radical feminists, multiculturalists, sociologists . . . literary theorists, and (I am embarrassed to say) a good many philosophers as well . . . profess to have seen through what the rest of us take for granted. It's all an illusion, they tell us: honest inquiry is really neither desirable nor possible." Her central aim, in the work under review, is to confront all these intellectual cynics, but especially her wayward colleagues in philosophy.

In the first essay, "Confessions of an old-fashioned prig," Haack describes what it means to care for the truth, and what the difference is between genuine inquiry and pseudo-inquiry. She also argues that intellectual integrity is both possible and valuable.

The second chapter, "We pragmatists . . . ," is a playlet compiled from the words of C. S. Peirce and the self-styled "neo-pragmatist" Richard Rorty, its point being to show that Rorty's views have virtually no connection with genuine (Peircean) pragmatism. It seems that this little comedy has been performed more than once at American philosophy conferences.

In "Dry truth and real knowledge" and "Puzzling out science," Haack argues that all genuine inquiry is committed to scrutinizing results for error and that scientific inquiry is "the same, only more so." Science is more systematic than, say, history but it has no uniquely rational method and its practitioners are not uniquely rational human beings. We ought to be wary about claims to superior rationality, but wariness about the merits of human scientists and their human organizational arrangements should not lead to cynicism about science as such or inquiry as such.

The sixth and seventh chapters, "Science as social" and "Knowledge and propaganda," have to do with sociology and feminism. Haack argues that a "radically social conception of science" is not distinctively feminist and is not accurate either. There is an examination of the phrase "feminist epistemology," an expression which she describes as incongruous. And so it is: you might as well invent categories with names like "zoological banking practice" or "pharmacological hockey." "Masculinist epistemology" isn't any better, of course.

Chapter 8 has to do with the meaning or meanings of multiculturalism. The first half of Chapter 9, "Reflections on relativism: from momentous tautology to seductive contradiction," contains several excellent insights, though I found the second part, which deals with theories put forward by Hilary Putnam, rather confusing. (Indeed, Haack says that she herself feels confused by Putnam). The reflections in this essay begin with a useful taxonomy of relativisms. Haack then turns her attention to conceptual relativism, the thesis of which is that how many and what kinds of objects and properties there are in the world depend on one's conceptual scheme or one's vocabulary. Conceptual relativism is pretty global and not very enticing. If it makes sense at all it must entail propositions like the following: relative to scheme/vocabulary V_1 there are rocks in the world but relative to scheme/vocabulary V_2 there are no rocks; rocks do not exist. According to Haack this way of thinking about the existence of objects is almost incomprehensible. "[It] wavers unsteadily between the trivial: 'you can't describe the world without describing it' . . . and the manifestly false: 'incompatible descriptions of the world can both be true'." The first alternative is the "momentous tautology" and the second the "seductive contradiction." Toward the end of the essay Haack says she has not refuted relativism but I think that must be a slip of the pen. If she has shown that conceptual, global relativism wavers between triviality and falsehood, has she not refuted it? If that isn't a refutation, what is?

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Chapters 10 and 11 discuss the ethical issues that arise when university committees make academic appointments. Is affirmative action a good thing or a bad thing? Haack rejects an all-or-nothing approach but on the whole sticks to the view that the best man should get the job even if the best man is black or a woman. What about research? What happens when getting onto a short list depends on the number of one's publications? Here Haack returns to questions about the differences between the genuine, the pseudo, and the sham. She argues that the practice of giving jobs to the applicants with "the best research records" (i.e., the most publications) encourages sham research.

This book consists in the main of attacks on fads and fashions and the people who espouse them. Yet at the same time it is very good-humored. It is also well written and accessible and can be recommended to lay readers as well as professional philosophers and other academics. Years ago a well-known professor said: "Sue Haack's style is as clear as the purest water" and he was right.

Book notes

David Traxel 1898: The Birth of the American Century.
Knopf, 365 pages, $28.95

David Traxel is an avid reader of century-old newsprint, a man of infectious enthusiasms, and an engaging storyteller, but none of this makes him an especially good historian. He has dropped his bucket down the well of time and hauled up 1898, the year of the Spanish-American War, "twelve months of rich confusion, wild contradiction, and violent change" during which the United States "would turn from a long history of isolation and preoccupation with its own affairs to active foreign involvement and the challenges of being a world power." The bucket brims with rich material—T. R. and McKinley, Pulitzer and Hearst, the sinking of the *Maine*, and the Battle of Manila Bay—and Traxel ladles it out in sparkling cupfuls. But the book is all sparkle, all anecdote, in love with facts and people and events but wary of interpreting them; it brings us vivid pictures of the year as it unfolded but never in the context of the years that will follow. When, for example, McKinley chooses to acquire the Philippines from Spain, we learn how he struggled to make that decision and how Kipling applauded it, Mark Twain deplored it, and Mr. Dooley found the joke in it. What we don't learn, what we get no inkling of, is why the decision mattered, and what our sudden imperial relationship with the Philippines will mean in the decades to come—for America, for the Filipinos, for democracy, trade, and United States military strategy. The author's reluctance to shoulder the historian's burden is almost fatal to the book when it deals with matters of lasting consequence.

Luckily, this account of the "Birth of the American Century" does not always concern itself with the epochal. Traxel, whose previous book was a life of Rockwell Kent, is more at home with minor topics, with fads, trends, and the trivial-but-telling—with the personal rivalry between Edison and Westinghouse, the ethos of Omaha businessmen's clubs, the baking and marketing of the Uneeda Biscuit, and magazine pieces addressing such questions as "What becomes of the gentleman in the age of democratic equality?" Consistently amusing, maddeningly myopic, as busy, bright, and inconclusive as a year-end issue of *Time*, *1898* isn't new light on history, it's history lite.

Nancy Winters Man Flies: The Story of Alberto Santos-Dumont, Master of the Balloon, Conquerer of the Air.
The Ecco Press, 160 pages, $32

As befits the enchanted hero of a real-life fairy story, Alberto Santos-Dumont (1873–1932) was born the smallest, bravest, cleverest child of an indulgent king—Henrique Dumont, the fabulously wealthy "Coffee King of Brazil." When not lost inside

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the novels of Jules Verne, "Little Santos" tinkered with, and sometimes improved, the family plantation's ultra-modern machinery; mostly, however, he lay on the veranda and stared into the blue equatorial sky, dreaming of the day when he would conquer the heavens in a Verne-inspired airship of his own design. By the age of eighteen he was living in Paris, the sudden heir to his father's fortune.

What this brilliant, stylish, and utterly fearless young man did with his inheritance is the subject of Nancy Winters's beguiling book-length essay. He joined the Aero Club of France and, nattily dressed in high collars and boater, crashed several hot-air contraptions. He hired private tutors in engine-building and aerostatics. He began to make sketches for a new kind of balloon—ribbed, ruddered, hydrogen-filled, propelled by a gasoline motor: the world's first practical dirigible. By 1898 he had assembled a crew of workmen to execute his designs, a team which, over the next decade, would create twenty-three different Santos aircraft, each adding something permanent to the history of aviation. His interest in dirigibles peaked, in 1901, with airship No. 6, a yellow-silk cigar some 100 feet long, in which he cut a graceful arc around the Eiffel Tower on a half-hour flight from St.-Cloud to Paris and back, at one point scrambling out among the cables to kick the misfiring engine. After that he worked exclusively on heavier-than-air projects—biplanes, monoplanes, even an abortive helicopter—his designs independent of those of the Wright brothers, whose unpublished experiments were then only rumors in Europe. His greatest triumph came on November 12, 1906, when, at the Bois de Boulogne, he flew his No. 14-*bis*, a biplane with a forward box-kite rudder, in the first airplane flight to be officially timed and measured (21.2 seconds, 220 meters).

Winters, whom the jacket flap describes as a London-based writer with a "particular interest in style and adventure," attempts neither clinical biography nor aviation history (for that see Peter Wykeham's *Santos-Dumont: A Study in Obsession*, 1962). Instead she gives us Santos's story as a sort of flowering dream, allowing us to appreciate it as the Belle Epoque did, with wonder, amusement, and delight in its unfolding. If the charm of her prose is sometimes forced, that of her illustrations is always genuine, and there are more than 100 of them—photographs, caricatures, Santos's own sketches. Here are four captions: "He often crashed into the Park of the Rothschilds, where champagne was sent up during repairs." "She was a famous Cuban beauty and the only other person ever to fly a Santos-Dumont airship. Her picture dominated his desk for years." "His illness [multiple sclerosis] put a halt to work [at the age of thirty-six]. He closed up his apartment, and never flew again." "'Those who knew him could not help but love him.'—Gabriel Voisin."

Eugene Jolas Man From Babel.
Edited, annotated & introduced by
Andreas Kramer & Rainer Rumold.
Yale University Press, 326 pages, $30

To come into consciousness in a troubled borderland, where rival languages, politics, myths, and ideas are forever at one another's throats, is to suffer a terrible psychic wound. Eugene Jolas (1894–1952), poet, journalist, and impresario of modernism, was raised in the crucible of Alsace-Lorraine, that frontier-world where France and Germany glared at each other "through the spite-fences of history" and the local patois traded public blows with the official Hochdeutsch. Jolas felt at home in neither culture, neither tongue; emigration to America, and mastery of English, only deepened his sense of exile and his tragic "glotto-pathology." "I belonged everywhere and nowhere," he writes in these remarkable memoirs, begun (in German) in the late 1930s and left unfinished (in English) upon his death. "I was forever homesick for other shores, for other river-banks, for other chimerical cities of my fancy." And for other chimerical languages—for the common language lost to man at Babel, for the spirit-

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freeing tongue of the angels, for some universal idiom, some super-English of the future that would at last unite the continents and wash the West clean of all its Alsaces. (Jolas was, at bottom, a "white" Romantic mystic like Novalis, who thought the world would be redeemed only when we learned to speak the one true human language, whose linguistics lies dormant in the racial unconscious.)

The closest Jolas ever came to an earthly paradise was Paris in the 1920s; there he found happiness among the Anglo-American and French avant-garde and their polyglot experiments in Dada, Surrealism, and Stein-ese. It was in Paris that Jolas launched *transition*, the little magazine in which he attempted "to build a bridge between Europe and America," a transatlantic highway for the currents of high modernism. During the magazine's eleven-year run (1927–1938), he published Hemingway, Hart Crane, Beckett, and Dylan Thomas; he promoted Duchamp, Miró, Man Ray, and Grosz; he translated (with his American wife, Maria) Kafka, Döblin, Jung, Benn, Paul Eluard, and Léon-Paul Fargue. But mostly *transition* was about James Joyce and the editor's longed-for "Revolution of the Word": *Finnegans Wake* was the Revolution's gospel and Jolas himself its greatest evangelist. Readers coming to these memoirs for news about the Joyce and Jolas friendship will not be disappointed; the pages that describe it are affectionate, detailed, gossipy, and moving. The book's greatest interest, however, lies in Jolas's account of his war and postwar years, when he fought, as an American press officer, in the Allies' war of words against the Germans. His chapters on the work of anti-Nazi propagandists are riveting, as are those on his own efforts, as editor-in-chief of a postwar German news service, to help rid the German press of Nazi diction and ideology. They go far to make us see that what Jolas called the "malady of language" was more than a personal wound, an artistic pose, or the stuff of little-magazine manifestoes. It was, indeed, a deeply moral matter, "the real metaphysical problem of the day."

—*Christopher Carduff*

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Notebook

Mythmaking & the Aldo Moro case

by Richard Drake

After twenty years, the search continues for definitive explanations and ultimate meaning in the Aldo Moro murder case. The key leader during the 1960s and 1970s of Italy's regnant Christian Democratic party, Moro died in 1978 at the hands of the Red Brigades, a Marxist-Leninist terrorist group. They killed Moro fifty-five days after their spectacular kidnapping of him on the streets of Rome in an operation that left five security guards dead.

The Moro case has given rise to endless conspiracy theories, and, in trying to determine their real worth, the historian faces the perennial questions about evidence, logic, and interpretation in historical argument. The traditional approach to these questions, originating in Thucydides, called for a rigorous critical analysis of history based as much as possible on documented evidence. The primary philosophical source of opposition to traditional historiography is Marx, who wanted to change the world, not merely to understand history. Politics, therefore, has always strongly colored Marxist historiography, in its direct and indirect forms, from the late nineteenth century up through Foucault's notion that truth is relative to "regimes of power." Marxism and its offshoots have been enormously influential in Italy, and they remain so even after the demise of the Communist Party and the radical reduction of formal Communist culture. The pro-conspiracy reaction of the Italian Left to the Aldo Moro murder case illustrates the great extent to which our first loves leave their mark on us.

Conspiracy theories in the Moro case involve the Italian government, the CIA, Henry Kissinger, Mossad, the KGB, and numerous other entities and individuals either singly or in diverse combinations. Conspiracy theorists hold that the progressive Moro, who zealously worked to include the Communist Party in Italy's ruling coalition, was sacrificed on the altar of Cold War politics. In short, reactionaries on both sides of the Atlantic welcomed Moro's kidnapping as a godsend and, by refusing to negotiate for his release and failing to mount an effective police search, sent him to his doom. These traitorous individuals thereby accomplished their real objective during the fifty-five-day manhunt. The question haunting Italy today is, Who allowed Moro to die what the novelist Leonardo Sciascia called that "vile death"?

Reporting on the huge popularity of such conspiracy theories in Italy, *The New York Times* earlier this year listed me, along with Giulio Andreotti and some former Red Brigade terrorists, as "the only prominent dissenters" from the conventional wisdom in Italy about "a dark conspiracy that remains veiled" in this notorious crime.[1] I qualified for their list because of my book,

1 See "Agony Lingers, Twenty Years After the Moro Killing," by Alessandra Stanley in *The New York Times* (May 9, 1998).

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The Aldo Moro Murder Case (Harvard University Press, 1995), in which I downplay the conspiracy theories. Andreotti, a former prime minister, is currently on trial for murder, and the Red Brigade terrorists are convicted murderers. They are not the most morally unproblematic allies one could wish for in a battle where virtually the rest of the country, according to *The New York Times*, is on the other side.

The New York Times exaggerated the one-sidedness of this battle. The reporter neglected to mention that among the dissenters are to be found all the judges in the five sets of concluded Moro trials. In the front rank of the most knowledgeable experts about this complex case, the judges disparage the conspiracy theories that hold the Italians in thrall, arguing that no evidence of any kind exists to support such interpretations of the Moro murder. In a letter to *The New York Times*, I pointed out this discrepant fact, but learned from an editorial assistant that the newspaper did not wish to publish a response "at this time." The press had spoken.

It seemed odd to me that *The New York Times* would have ignored the Moro trials. During four separate trips to Rome, where I did research in the judicial archives, I developed a deep respect for the professionalism as well as the physical and moral courage of the judges in the Moro case. For many years, they had to live under around-the-clock police security, all the while mindful that the Red Brigades had murdered numerous other judges for doing their duty. The Italian judicial system as a whole has been the target of severe criticism for its slowness, corruption, and politicization, but the judges in this case persevered in their work with extraordinary diligence. They made a valiant attempt to get at the truth.

On the basis of the evidence, the judges concluded that the Red Brigades, along with the much wider Marxist-Leninist revolutionary culture from which Red Brigadism came, bore responsibility for the Moro tragedy. They reasoned that failures by the police, however numerous and astonishing, could not be redefined as crimes without a more solid basis of fact than has yet been unearthed. While acknowledging the obvious—that Moro had powerful political enemies—the judges insisted that conspiracy theorists make too many assumptions about the efficacy of that enmity in the outcome of the police search. No evidence exists that conspiracies, if they occured at all, had a bearing on Moro's fate.

Unlike conspiracy theorists, the judges looked to the domain of verifiable reality. The voluminous court documents tell a story about the addiction of a generation to the revolutionary ideas of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and their popularizers in Italy, to which only Dostoyevsky or Conrad could do complete justice. In the words of one repentant terrorist, addiction to heroin would have been preferable. The documents show that Moro died because of these ideas, and they show nothing else. For Italian leftists, this was the wrong verdict because it pointed to the historic Marxist-Leninist culture they had shared with the Red Brigades as the real nemesis of Moro.

Red Brigadism had flourished in Italy, the judges in one trial concluded, because it had found "protection in diverse quarters that did not conceal their scandalous 'contiguity.'" For all those under the beguiling spell of the revolutionary mystique, the prescriptions of Marx and Lenin transformed the most bestial acts of inhumanity into thrilling deeds on behalf of the proletariat. The Moro kidnapping was just such an act. It thrilled a motley assortment of left-wingers. Sympathizers brazenly cheered and toasted the Red Brigades for living the revolution. If only a few graduate students and their professors hold such beliefs, a modern society can still manage its proper business, but, in the view of the judges, Italy was proof of the inevitably disastrous effect that a deeply rooted Marxist-Leninist culture has on a civilized polity.

The findings of the judges have provoked reactions of disbelief and outrage, but their challenge to the disbelievers and the outraged to produce something besides con-

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jectures heavy-laden with conspiracy about the government's manifold failures to free Moro has gone unanswered.

To be sure, the dismal performance of the Italian police in their search for Moro has given conspiracy theorists plenty of ammunition. The police forgot to follow up important leads, they lost evidence, and they did not think to keep obvious suspects under surveillance. To produce a record as consistently egregious as this, conspiracy theorists argue, would require a conscious effort. By the law of averages, the police should have gotten something right at least, but failure or—as the word appears in the conspiracy literature—"failure" crowned every one of their efforts for fifty-five straight days. By and large, the Italian people have refused to believe that so much police power could have been employed over such a long period to achieve no crime-fighting purpose whatsoever unless by conspiratorial design.

Although two authors of the Left took the lead in advancing conspiracy theories in the Moro case—Leonardo Sciascia in *L'affare Moro* (1978) and Sergio Flamigni in *La tela del ragno* ("The Spider's Web," 1988)—it is not only the Left that resists the explanation of the judges. For example, Tina Anselmi, the Christian Democratic chairman of a parliamentary commission investigating Propaganda 2, claimed that this secret right-wing Masonic lodge probably undermined the search for Moro. P2 lodge members in the police and the secret services would have had the motive and the opportunity to betray Moro, whose progressive politics, particularly his opening to the hated and feared Communist party, they held in abhorrence. The Cold War tensions of Italy's political situation in 1978 led Anselmi and the majority of the commission's members to conclude that P2 would have welcomed Moro's death. Many Italians from very different segments of the political spectrum continue to think of the Moro case in terms of these secret powers.

The logic of the conspiracy theory in the Moro case possesses considerable force. It is reasonable to think, in the manner of Anselmi, that Moro might have been victimized in some way by anti-Communist elements inside and outside Italy. Government officials hostile to Moro might have attempted to sabotage efforts to free him, and with all the mistakes and oversights in the police search, about which many books have been written, the temptation to see the workings of a conspiracy is understandable.

The judges, too, have logic on their side, and this suggests that in order to understand the Moro case logic alone is not enough. It is logical to assume that there might have been foul play by the authorities, but it is just as logical to ascribe the missed leads, the lost evidence, and the maddening oversights to the poor professional preparation of the Italian police for a crime of this magnitude. As a point of logic, it is highly improbable to assume, as all the conspiracy theorists do, that the police could have saved Moro had they so desired. Expressly rebutting this assumption, one of the judges observed that the failures of the police in the Moro search were not in the least surprising. For the police to have succeeded in freeing Moro would have been the monstrous deviation from the norm that conspiracy buffs are claiming for the actual search. These logical arguments, therefore, cancel each other out as explanations of the Moro tragedy. We are left, as the pre-poststructuralist judges have insisted all along, with the actual evidence as our only reliable guide.

As a historian very much aware of a dominant tendency in the academy to view objective scholarship as a myth, I faced the same questions about evidence in writing my book. I came down on the side of the judges not because of their conclusions, but because of their Thucydidean methods of carefully sifting the evidence for the most reasonable interpretation.

The autobiographical literature written by former Red Brigadists illuminates the insights of the judges about the central role of Marxist-Leninism in the Moro tragedy. To

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be a Red Brigadist at all meant subscribing to a Marxist-Leninist world view, as Patrizio Peci made clear in *Io l'infame* ("I the Infamous One," 1983). One of the organization's most feared killers, Peci recalled his motive for joining the Red Brigades: "It is obvious that one does not make such a choice if one does not believe completely in Communism, if one does not believe in the armed struggle as the only way to bring it about, if one does not believe in victory." The cause became everything for Peci, as it did for Alberto Franceschini, a co-founder of the Red Brigades. In *Mara, Renato, e io: storia dei fondatori delle Brigate Rosse* ("Mara, Renato, and I: The History of the Founders of the Red Brigades," 1988), he described his longing for Communism in its purest and most absolute form. Red Brigadism was born of this longing.

The kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro fell completely in line with revolutionary Communist tactics as the Red Brigades understood them. The man who actually killed Moro, Mario Moretti, noted in *Brigate Rosse: una storia italiana* ("The Red Brigades: An Italian Story," 1994) that the terrorists thought of themselves as part of the tradition of "Communist revolution." They were not given to "theoretical rigidities" any more than Lenin was in 1917 with his use of Marxist doctrines. Nevertheless, they undertook the Moro operation and all their operations with the single-minded aim of accelerating the cause of revolution, exactly as Lenin had with his tactics. The two Communist journalists interviewing Moretti for *Brigate Rosse* tried to convince him that Red Brigadism had nothing to do with Marxist-Leninism, but he had little trouble disposing of their objections.

Another Red Brigade memoirist directly addressed the significance of the Left's efforts in general to distance itself from Red Brigadism through the promotion of conspiracy theories. In *Armi e bagagli: un diario dalle Brigate Rosse* ("Arms and Baggage: A Diary from the Red Brigades," 1987), Enrico Fenzi explained that the Left wanted to

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forget its own acceptance of the revolutionary premises from which Red Brigadism had evolved. According to this internationally acclaimed Dante scholar and former terrorist, the Left was always the first to depict terrorism as the natural spawn of plots on the Right and highly unrepresentative hallucinations on the Left. In fact, the so-called hallucinations of the Red Brigades reflected very widely held left-wing views in Italy.

The Left's strategy of subterfuge, in combination with legitimate doubts by many thoughtful people from all sectors of political opinion—including the members of the Moro family—has clouded the central issue in the Moro murder case: the Red Brigades, fanatically inspired by their Marxist-Leninist ideology, kidnapped and killed Aldo Moro in the hope of provoking a crisis that would produce the Communist society of their fantasies. This issue has held almost no interest for the Left in its analysis of the Moro case. As Fenzi makes plain, the Left, with nothing more really than political guesswork to show for its efforts, has been obsessed with the CIA and its global network of minions. In their literature, it is assumed that the CIA functions as a diabolically efficient organization, leaving no trace of its infernal machinations. The agency's numerous failures and scandals, however, oblige us to question this assumption.

In categorically ruling out any CIA involvement in the Moro case, Moretti declared that the Communist Left had itself to blame for the stunning success of the Red Brigades. He described the Red Brigades as the most radical expression of a vast movement in Italy. It was the intention of the organization to remain small, "a nucleus," but for years their campaign against the Christian Democrats met with widespread approval on the Communist Left. Without the broad support that the Red Brigades received from an immense network of backers, whose demonstrations and slogans confirmed the leaders' belief in the imminence of revolution, terrorism would have faded quickly in Italy. The Red Brigades would have been nothing more than an Italian version of the Weather Underground. Instead they killed and maimed for years, contributing mightily to Italy's dreadful record in the 1970s of having the highest incidence of terrorism in the industrialized world. Things changed drastically with Moro's death in 1978. Thereafter, many erstwhile sympathizers and well-wishers began to reinterpet their ideas about revolution and to invent a more acceptable past for themselves. Moretti's book exposes this campaign of mythmaking for what it is.

Similarly, though without drawing all the necessary conclusions, the article in *The New York Times* exposes the Left's dirty secret in the Aldo Moro murder case: "the generation of baby boomers who . . . at least for awhile sided with the Red Brigades are now middle-aged network executives and publishers who shape public opinion." The sober but devastating indictment by the judges of Italy's Marxist-Leninist culture did not please these opinion makers. To evade a moral indictment of their entire generation of left-wing revolutionaries and sympathizers, they have ignored the unwelcome evidence and testimony in the Moro case. Instead they favor government plots, which even in the up-to-date reporting of *The New York Times* retain their entirely unproven character. Until proof to the contrary turns up, the verdict of the judges, though intensely unpopular, will continue to withstand the scrutiny of every candid mind.

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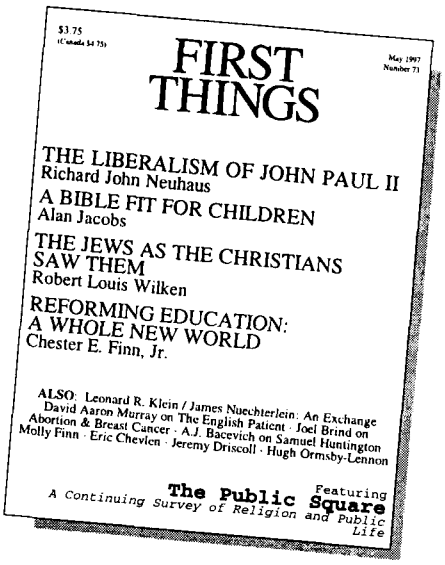
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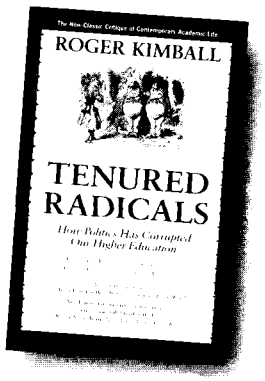

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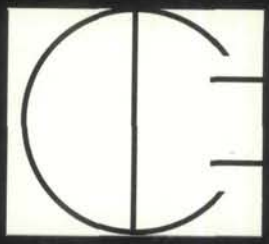

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